


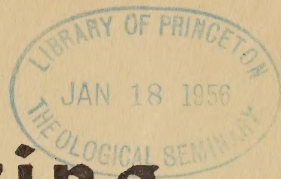
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Rediscovering prayer



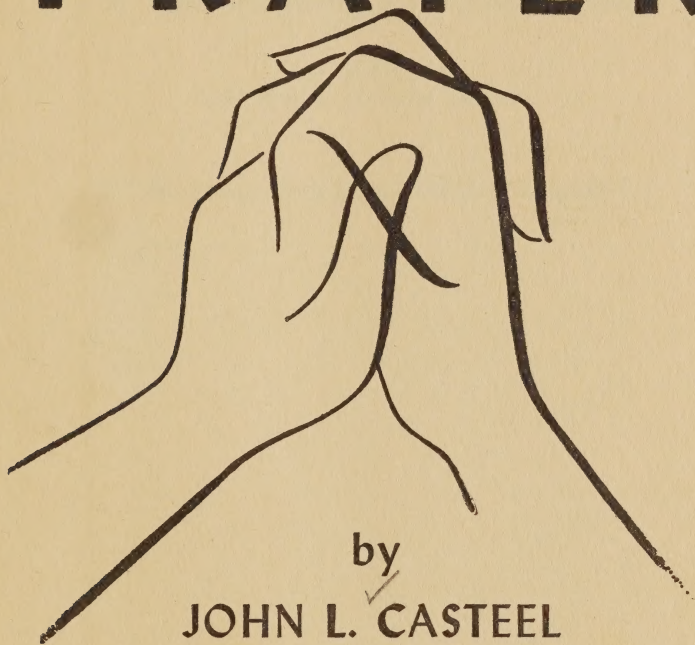
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REDISCOVERING PRAYER



rediscovering **PRAYER**



by
JOHN L. CASTEEL

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REDISCOVERING PRAYER

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TO
AUDELINÉ

Preface

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," wrote Paul to the Christians at Philippi, "for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." This conjunction of God's initiative and our response marks out the lines and the source of our life of prayer. On the one hand, there is open to us the resources, the promises, the purposes that God has for us; and that are poured out upon us in the events, circumstances, and inspirations working upon us through the years. If we but came awake to all that he works in us, we would go about our life astonished and wondering at what God means for us to become.

And on the other hand, there is our response to his work in us—which so often becomes willful resistance, and when not that, still is made so feebly, so intermittently, and so often with a calculating eye to our own

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interest or advantage! The initiative of God does not free us of response—of *responsibility*, in the root sense of having the capacity and accepting the obligation to respond fittingly to his purpose and claim upon us. We have our work to do. Neither a false modesty, which sees anything we do for our salvation as incapable of affecting the outcome, nor a false optimism, which assumes God will do everything for us, can clear us of this response.

The practice of prayer calls us to a life of devotion in keeping with the greatness—both of promise and of responsibility—that Paul implies. If God works in us to bring about his will and his good pleasure for us, we can be assured that he will not cut the pattern to our own limited ideas as to what we are meant to be. God does nothing small, even in the least of his creatures. But at the same time, our response in prayer, as in all our life, will require a heroic effort on our part. We are to work out our salvation—our response to God's initiative, through which alone we can discover meaning and purpose for our life—not lightheartedly or casually, not with tender concern for our own frailties and inconveniences, but with the fear and trembling that the issue at stake requires.

Paul finds the authority for this heroic quality in the Christian life in the example of Jesus himself, who came "all the way downstairs"—to use Evelyn Underhill's phrase describing prayer—from Godhead to humiliation, from eternal glory to the fear and trembling of Gethsemane and the cross; but whom God, working out his will and good pleasure, has "highly exalted above

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every name." How then, shall we do less than have in us this mind when we pray?

It is from the high ground marked out in these words of Paul that this book is written. The purpose has not been to make prayer seem complex, or a strenuous spiritual exercise suitable only to the gifted spiritual athlete. The alternatives, however, are not those of prayer suitable only for geniuses, or prayer made simple and easy for the weak or the immature. Kierkegaard pointed out the fallacy of this distinction between the "genius" and the "apostle," insisting that the Christian life is not intended for those who are especially endowed; but that it does make its claim upon the will of all men.

The vitality of any of our endeavors can be measured better by the goals we accept than the attainments we have reached. The reader is encouraged, therefore, to persevere in his own endeavor in prayer; and insofar as this book may serve as guide and inspirer, to take of it whatever suits his present need, while he puts ahead for himself those suggestions which he cannot appropriate now.

Here, then, is no invitation to take it easy through the pleasant meadows of prayer. But, it is hoped, some word of encouragement may be spoken here to those who are willing to take prayer seriously, as it requires us to do, and who, as their circumstances and abilities require, will have this mind to follow Him who "for the *joy* that was set before him, endured the cross. . . ."

We learn somewhat to pray by our solitary endeavors. But prayer is essentially a communal experience, in a kind of sacred intimacy. Those to whom this book owes

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much in the way of direct instruction and suggestion are also those with whom I have been privileged to share the life of prayer, and who would be the first to say that our common experience should be kept inviolate from the mention of individual names. I must remember many of my students, and my colleagues through the years, who have shared this life with me; friends in the Kirkridge movement, and the Student Christian Movement; and the whole company of the church, from whose common life of faith my own has been nurtured.

I wish to thank Winnifred Wygal, Edward Nestigen, and Paul Moritz for reading the manuscript. Many of these pages have been enriched through their kindly counsel. I am grateful also to Mrs. Alma Webb and Mrs. Katherine Bishop, of the secretarial staff of the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, whose faithfulness and cheerfulness in preparing the manuscript have far exceeded the line of duty.

Acknowledgment must be made of the kindness of publishers of the works quoted, as listed in the chapter notes, for permission to use these quotations. Certain passages from the Bible are taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV), copyrighted 1946 and 1952, and are used by permission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

My wife, Audeline, and our children, Margaret and John, have been both the object of and the answer to much of my praying; and by being what they are have made this book possible.

The book itself may bear some witness to the thanksgiving I return to God for the privilege he has given me in the life from which the book comes.

JOHN L. CASTEEL

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Where Praying Begins

THE JOURNEY toward the rediscovery of prayer is enlisting today an increasing caravan of thoughtful men and women. Some have been moved to this pilgrimage by the grave perils that hang over our civilization. Many who have fought valiantly for justice and peace and human dignity have now begun to grow weary of their warfare and doubtful of its outcome. Like Georges Bernanos, looking out of his study window upon the havoc brought to the island of Majorca by the Spanish Civil War, they have begun to believe that "prayer is the only form of revolt that remains upright."¹

Others are turning to reconsider prayer because of the strains which our world crisis imposes on the moral fiber and the mental integrity of themselves or those for whom they care. Troubled to see that, for a distressing number of individuals, interior resources are proving

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inadequate for the demands made upon them by contemporary living, they are beginning to ask of every phase of our culture—education, science, political activity, social reform—the question Macbeth asked of the doctor, “Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased?” In prayer, is there offered a means for the restoration of some degree of wholeness, purpose, and vitality in human lives?

And beyond these questionings that arise out of the times there confront us the ageless perplexities of mankind, the defeat of our hopes, the frustration of our purposes, the betrayal of our loves, and the inevitable, summary end of all life in death. Although remarkable progress has been made in alleviating the gross tragedies of life, in the end we seem often only to have postponed, not prevented them. Before these “permanent emergencies” of our existence, can prayer be of help to us?

Yet the return to prayer arises from still another and deeper cause. Men turn to prayer in the extremity of their fears, or anxieties, or helplessness before the perils of their day, and of all human existence. But they also turn to prayer because of the almost universal and unquenchable yearning they have for God, and for that fullness of life to be found in knowing, loving, and serving him.

This hunger for God will be described by every generation in its own language. In the seventeenth century, Henry Scougal, that bright and gentle young Scot, expressed it in saying, “The glorious things spoken of heaven may make even the carnal heart in love with

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it.”² For some modern minds, the statement of the psychologist, C. C. Jung, may be more intelligible: “Everyone’s ultimate aim and strongest desire lie in developing the fullness of human existence that is called personality”—a goal, as he points out, to be realized through the establishment of a personal relation between the human personality and a Power outside itself.³ Dorothy Day, a distinguished Catholic laywoman, speaks experientially of this hunger as she knew it even in her childhood, by quoting the words of Kirilloff, in Dostoevski’s novel, *The Possessed*: “All my life I have been haunted by God.”⁴ In every generation, this interior restlessness, this mingling of impassioned longing with the intimation of bright hope, rekindles the inward being in men and women, until they move out to seek Him by whom that being, and that hunger, first were given us.

Nor is this longing after God confined to high moments of ecstasy and vision. A young man sitting down to plan and dream for his future—his career, his marriage, his achievement of professional success and social status—may appear to be thinking in quite material terms. Income, prospects, and connections may seem to be the center of his anticipation and his calculation as to how they are to be achieved and employed. Yet even as he speaks of these practical considerations, the light in his eyes and the nuance of his voice betrays a larger, unguessed hope, whose aura flames about his dreams. Though his conscious view of his future may be common enough, he is not content to suppose that these calculations for the future exhaust the meaning of his

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life, or can satisfy his deepest aspirations. He may not know or acknowledge this to be his state, but he is not far from the Psalmist crying,

*As the hart panteth after the water brooks,
So panteth my soul after thee, O God.*

Is it possible that this hunger, at the center of our being, for a fullness of life, a brightness on our destiny beyond our highest and most eager anticipations, can really be known to us? Can a life of prayer bring us nearer that Source of all our life? Can it open the way by which we can enter into that fullness—whether we call it heaven, or personality, or communion with God—for which we seem to have been created?

Faced by such questions as these, many people today have been led to think of prayer somewhat wistfully. If they do not live in a time of much praying, at least they have heard that earlier generations did. They have been told that their forefathers found prayer a resource for all their needs because it led them to God, who is a “very present help in time of trouble,” and who is “able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.” Though these modern individuals may not pray themselves, sometimes they are moved to ask whether there might not be something in it.

Yet we live in a different day from our fathers. The faith that made prayer possible for them does not come easily to us. We are not sure whether our understanding of the universe and of our existence in it may not have outmoded prayer. That earlier faith sometimes appears to us as immature, when it is not illusory. For better or

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for worse, we must live, think, act, as men and women of our time; and if we are to pray, we must be able to understand prayer in terms that take into account all that we know and have come to believe about the nature and meaning of human existence in this universe.

In what sense, then, are we to be concerned, as the title of this book proposes, with "rediscovering prayer"? From one point of view, any approach to prayer must always be a "discovery." The experience of no one else ever can take the place of the individual's unique, first-hand experience in praying. Even a book of this kind can only be, at best, a summary and report of what some men and women have found to be true in their life of prayer. Room must always be left for those who will rise to say, "Yet I have found it otherwise."

Still, when we speak about prayer, we are not concerning ourselves with an activity unknown to any previous generation. If we speak of broadcasting on television, or flying in jet-propelled planes, we have to deal with activity and experience that are, in part at least, new adventures for mankind. But prayer is no new excursion or experiment for men. Among the earliest tracings of cave dwellers are the drawings of hands lifted in the gestures of supplication. The most primitive peoples have had their rituals of prayer; and the mood of praying, naïve and superstitious as it may have been, seems to have saturated their daily life far more than the attitude of prayer permeates the life of most modern people.

It must be said, also, that although prayer has had no large place in our own lives, we have been nurtured

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in a civilization whose climate has been that of the Christian religion, in which prayer is an indispensable element. Some persons will recall how the habit of prayer shaped the spirit of family ancestors, and will recognize that though they themselves do not pray, they are what they are in no small degree because their grandparents did. However difficult it may be for us to engage in prayer, we are hard put to imagine a world whose atmosphere has not been created and sustained through the prayers of devout men and women.

The question that concerns us, then, is not whether we are to initiate some new mode of human behavior. It is, rather, whether we can rediscover in the faith and experience of the past, the meaning and the possibilities of prayer for our own times, our needs, and our aspirations. To "rediscover" prayer requires not simply the initiation of that which is entirely new, nor yet the imitation of the past, but the best use in our own living, unique experience of the rich heritage gathered for us by those who have lived before us. Whatever our motive for joining this pilgrimage toward the rediscovery of prayer, we will be making the venture in the company of a significant number of persons, for whom our times and our life require the most serious, responsible course of which we are capable.

Prayer Begins in Our Meeting with God

As we set out upon this venture of rediscovery, our first question will be this: Has God anything to do with us; and can we have anything to do with him? Is com-

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munication—"communion"—possible between God and ourselves? If it is not, prayer will be limited to a kind of interior dialogue. Though talking with ourselves can have value as a means of clarifying or disciplining our minds, it falls short of the aims we usually associate with praying. But if communication between God and men is possible, then we are able to deal with the difficulties which often arise when we pray.

These difficulties sometimes appear insurmountable because we ask the wrong questions about prayer at the outset. "Can prayer be answered?" "Is prayer anything more than autosuggestion?" "How can I pray in a universe governed by physical law?" "If God can answer prayer, why does he allow evil to continue to happen?" All of these questions are important. They must be taken seriously, and the difficulty of answering them must be admitted. In the chapters to follow, we will consider some of the problems they raise.

But we can take a long first stride on our way to the practice of prayer when we recognize that none of these is the first question to be asked. If we insist on dealing with them before venturing further, we are in danger of being misled at the start. For one thing, questions such as these tend to center our attention upon ourselves: our fears, desires, feelings, and preconceptions of what prayer should do for us. Our praying turns inward, and we begin to measure the success of it by asking whether the results fit into our notions as to how prayers should be answered, how we feel while we pray, and whether praying is doing us any good. Such introspections, like the continuous pulse-taking of a sick per-

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son, often intensify the very fears and doubts which we are trying to resolve.

Another consequence, even more serious, of putting these questions first in our inquiry is that, in asking them, we fail to understand God and the way he acts in our prayers. Only when we can find some point outside ourselves, upon which our practice of prayer can be grounded, will we be able to engage in it with assurance. We must find such a point in him to whom we pray. Any consideration of the meaning of prayer for our lives, therefore, must begin with our thinking about God, with whom in prayer we seek to have communion.

How are we to think of God? A full answer to that question would take us beyond the scope of this book. It would require an attempt to say what the powers and attributes of God may be, how he works in the universe, and how he deals with the affairs and the destinies of men. In spite of all that men have thought, and written, of God, he still exceeds our powers of comprehension or description. "And now you ask, 'How shall I think of Him?'" writes the thirteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. "To this I have no answer except to say, 'I do not know.'"⁵ That we should succeed so poorly in this endeavor is due both to our limitations as human creatures and to the inexhaustible, incomprehensible richness of being in God himself.

God is infinitely more, and other, than we can know or describe him to be. Yet we are not left in hopeless obscurity about him. In all times and circumstances men have been given some hint of him in the universe that surrounds us. "Ever since the creation of the world

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his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20. RSV). The Christian faith goes beyond these general indications of the nature of God to affirm that the highest idea we can have of him is to think of him as a personal Being, the one true Person, after whose nature our own incomplete and inconstant personalities are formed.

This means that God has in an infinite degree the kind of characteristics which we attribute to personality at our human level, including intelligence, purposiveness, and the power to make choices and to act upon them. To think of God in this way is not, of course, to reduce him merely to our own image. God is not simply the best that we know or can imagine. He is himself perfect being, complete and all-sufficient in himself, not shaped or circumscribed by anything we think or say about him. What we are trying to do here, however, is quite the opposite of bringing God down to our measure. It is trying to think of ourselves, our nature and image, in the light of the fact that we have our life and being from God and share in some way the attributes of personal being which are his in all perfection.

In the light of our question—whether there can be any communication between God and men—we must notice one of these attributes which affects our understanding of prayer. This is the power of a person to communicate or to withdraw himself. The individual who seems unable to communicate something of himself to others will impress us as a handicapped and impoverished personality. The same judgment will be made

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about the individual who seems unable to maintain any reserve or privacy concerning his own interior life. Even that most intimate realm of personal relations, romantic love between two individuals, has its boundaries of self-disclosure and self-withdrawal. One of our poets has written,

*Cease not to be a mystery to me,
Lest I in terror should forsake you quite.*⁶

A strong personality is able to keep in balance these complementary powers of self-communication and self-reserve in ways appropriate to the circumstances and to the persons with whom he meets.

That God possesses these attributes is declared, in some degree, by the great religions of mankind. In the Christian faith, such an understanding of the personal being of God is central. On the one hand, he has the power, according to his infinite wisdom, to withhold his presence from us. "Thou art a God that hidest thyself," cries the prophet (Isaiah 45:15). This is a truth which we are tempted to ignore today, and especially in our superficial ideas about prayer. Because God must be everywhere, sustaining and creating his universe, and because we like to believe that nothing need stand as an intermediary between us and God, we have rather easily assumed that God is to be found anywhere, at any time we are inclined to turn to him.

It is true that God is everywhere at all times in his complete fullness of power and wisdom and purpose. But it is not true that he is always at our disposal, always available to us, as our whim may lead us to come

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to him. "Seek ye the Lord *while he may be found*," pleads the same prophet, with the plain warning that there may be times when our coming to him will not be possible (Isaiah 55:6). Only those who grasp this truth about our relations with God will be prepared to understand how it can happen that our attempts to pray sometimes seem unreal and devoid of any consciousness of his presence; or will be prepared to acknowledge how much we, ourselves, are responsible for this estrangement from God. Only those who grasp this truth will commit themselves to the labor, often arduous as it is rewarding, which the sustained practice of prayer demands.

But if God seems at times to have withdrawn himself from communication with us, it is also true that he reveals himself to us in ways and in measure beyond our highest anticipation. He has done so in nature, and in human history. But his fullest self-communicating has been given us in Jesus Christ. Of him, Paul wrote, "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6).

And this revelation of himself continues in the experience of men when the living Spirit of God reaches out and touches and enters into our lives. To some, this disclosure has come in crucial hours when they have encountered an overwhelming illumination and felt themselves to be in the hands of a compelling power. To others, the revelation has come slowly, almost imperceptibly, so that only by looking back in the per-

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spective of the years do they see how here, and again there, God has been giving them new light, steadier purposes, and stronger powers by which to live, and has been adding to these the deepening consciousness of his presence.

However the disclosure comes, the judgment is the same: we are in communication with no impersonal force, however kindly its effects upon us may appear to be. We have met with a Person, who chooses in his own way and time to give something of himself to us. Communication, *communion*, between God and ourselves is possible because it is in the nature of God that he should choose to reveal something of himself to us; and because it is of our nature—the nature he has implanted in us—that we should respond by opening our minds and hearts and wills to him. Prayer begins for us at this point where God and men can meet.

Prayer Is Our Response to God's Initiative

When we understand prayer as this communicating of God himself with our human, creaturely selves, we are able to say two things about the nature of praying. The first is that we are to use the word "prayer" not as a name for a process, or a technique, or an activity that has meaning in and of itself, but as a term describing a kind of relationship between persons. Such terms lose their significance when we employ them as though they stood for an object of value in itself. In a romantic mood we can sing about "falling in love with love." But in real life it is always love for *someone* that

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claims us; when that someone is lost, love is a word without meaning. In the same way, "prayer" serves as a term to indicate the dialogue that goes on between God and ourselves. The purpose of thinking about prayer, and of praying, is not to improve our technique or to make a better prayer. It is, as John Donne wrote, "to get as near God as you can."⁷

The second thing to be said about the nature of prayer arises from the first. In every meeting between persons, someone must offer the inviting gesture, see that obstacles are removed and that the motive and the opportunity for meeting are provided. Who takes the initiative in bringing us together with God in prayer? Just as we have seen how we sometimes mistakenly assume that God is always available to us whenever we are inclined to communicate with him, so we are tempted, too, to suppose that when we do enter into communication with God, we are the persons who take the initiative and see that the meeting comes about.

Very much that has been said about prayer in our time has been concerned with the theme of man's search for God. Often, there has been implied that even though we never find him, the seeking in itself has been worthy of our best endeavor and is itself its own reward. This idea of our search for God has been set forth beautifully by William Rose Benét in his poem "The Falconer of God." The poet flings his soul, like a falcon, into the hunt for the silvery heron, the symbolic bird of all his heart's desire. But when the plummeting falcon grips that wondrous bird in his talons he brings home only a dead and piteous thing,

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*All the wonder
Gone that ever filled
Its guise with glory. . . .*

Yet the poet returns to the hunt, still pledged to seek the heron, though he knows that pledge still to end disastrously.⁸

Even though this idea may seem uncongenial to our way of thinking—in a time when so large a part of our life takes for granted that men initiate most of the activities which make up our experience—we will be greatly advanced in our understanding of prayer if we grasp the truth that here the initiative is not ours, but God's. The words Jesus is reported as saying to the woman at the wellside in Samaria describe this action on the part of God. "The true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth"—this is the attitude in which we are to pray—"for the Father seeketh such to worship him"—there is God's own initiative reaching out toward us (John 4:23-24).

In Christian thought, this initiative of God has been called his "prevenient grace." "Grace" implies an action freely done, without compulsion, and with ample power and assurance to carry it through effectively. The graceful athlete is one who performs with a combination of strength and ease, of power and deftness. The gracious hostess is one whose hospitality is unfeigned, whose courtesy is uncalculated and is offered generously out of regard for her guest. Nothing we might do or say could compel God to enter into personal relations with

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us. But what we cannot compel, he does freely out of his own love for us.

In this voluntary self-giving, the "prevenient" character of God's grace is suggested. The word derives from familiar Latin roots, meaning "to go before," as our word "prevent" implies. It takes us back, again, to the initiative character of God's self-revelation. In all the experience of men with God, as described in the Bible, this prevenient character of his action is made clear. The "pillar of cloud and fire" that "went before" the people of Israel on their journey out of Egypt into the promised land is the symbol of this prevenience in the historical events of a nation. The "word of the Lord" as it came to the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed thee . . . I ordained thee a prophet," typifies this anticipatory act of God in shaping the life and the work of the individual.

The significance of this truth for our praying will be seen at many points in the pages which follow. Here, we wish only to make clear our bearings at the outset of our journey toward the rediscovery of prayer, and to recognize that our venturing might be described more accurately as an endeavor to make ourselves more responsive to the outreach of God toward us. The saints have given their testimony to this origin of prayer when they have spoken of their own prayers as being something, not that they themselves have achieved, but that God had given to them. Our response to this initiative action on God's part is to do what we can to put ourselves where he may find us, to open ourselves that his spirit may enter our lives, and to discipline ourselves

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so that we shall be free of the encumbrances and distractions which thwart his efforts to draw us into communion with himself. The rhythm of this initiative and response has been expressed by Paul in these words: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13-14. RSV).

Prayer Can Be Rediscovered Only by Praying

We have described prayer as communication between God and ourselves, in which God takes the initiative to bring us into communion with himself. How can prayer of this kind become our own? Those who have had long experience in praying, and have been nurtured in the Christian faith, will find much of what has been said familiar and will be convinced in some measure of its truth. Others may hesitate to venture further, asking whether some further assurances are not needed before they can enter into the practice of prayer for themselves. How can those who hesitate discover for themselves that prayer is the kind of communion we have claimed it to be?

Here, we are faced by a contradiction in our modern way of thinking. In certain areas of thought today we insist, rightly, upon testing opinions and conclusions by the strictest standards of what is termed "objectivity." No one cares to take a prescription from a druggist who puts ingredients together until they "seem about right." The idea that a blood bank ought to segregate blood contributed by people of different races, because white

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blood is claimed to be essentially different than the blood of Negroes or Asiatics, would be regarded by medical science as fantastic, if not socially dangerous. In all such matters we insist upon strict objectivity toward the claims made as to what is factually true.

But in the realm of personal relations such objectivity becomes not only impossible but often obstructive to any effort at discovering the truth. How are we to measure an individual's claim that he loves someone else? Cardiograms and galvanometer readings might give us clues as to his state of bodily excitation accompanying this state of feelings. But when the lover tries to convey his profession of love, he speaks not the language of scientific objectivity but of poetry.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. . . .

And all that follows in Elizabeth Browning's sonnet only repeats, in figures of compelling vividness and beauty, her first claim that her love is immeasurable and inexpressible. Could she have written the sonnet at all had she maintained a position of "objective detachment"? In this realm of human experience, the truth is to be known only by those who are willing to engage themselves as participants in the behavior they are trying to describe.

The same principle must guide us in our judgments about the reality of prayer. The assumption that complete detachment is either desirable or possible must give way to the principle that anyone who proposes to know the truth about prayer must himself engage in praying. The so-called scientific studies of prayer, pop-

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ular a generation ago, were bound to be inaccurate and inconclusive because of the misleading premise upon which they were undertaken—that is, that no one who prayed could be in a position to form any judgment about the meaning of what he was doing. Only the detached, non-praying observer could do that.

If we wish to discover for ourselves whether we can have communion with God, then, we must be willing to commit ourselves to the venture of praying. If we earnestly desire to learn whether it is true that God seeks as his worshipers those who would worship him in “spirit and in truth,” we must find the answer by beginning to pray. In spite of the difficulties and uncertainties that confront us, we must persevere in the confidence that we are not engaged in this endeavor alone, or even with the support of others, like ourselves, who pray, but that at our best we are only responding to all that God is doing to search us out and draw us to himself.

Because the venture of rediscovery is just this kind of meeting between persons, between God and ourselves, it will share the quality of uniqueness and unpredictableness that characterizes all true personal relations. For this reason, no description or system of praying can be regarded as valid or suitable for everyone alike. We will describe in the chapters that follow some of the principles and patterns of prayer which have been found central in the experience of many who have gone far along the journey we are about to undertake. Yet it would be quite possible for other books to be written—as other books have been written—reporting the experience of prayer in quite different terms.

WHERE PRAYING BEGINS

Here each of us must find his own way with God, or yet better, give God the freedom to do something fresh and unique in him. And as we move on our way, should anyone question us, and say, "But I have found it otherwise," we should have to reply, "That, too, may be the way of prayer."

Of one point, however, we can be certain: that if the life of prayer is to mean anything to us, our venture must be a heroic journey. If the source of motive turning us to prayer is to be found in the unquenchable hunger we have for God, and for the fulfillment of the meaning of our own existence through our coming into that kind of life and being which he intends for us, then there is little place for our being content with ourselves as we are. There is little place for allowing our practice of prayer to slip into easy and convenient molds which make no new demands upon us and cannot lead us to new heights of self-realization, because they cannot bring us nearer God.

This book is written with something of this "heroic" quality of our praying in mind. Its controlling thought has been that perspective suggested in the story Douglas Steere relates. When British horse breeders went to Arabia to buy new stock to improve their bloodlines, they proposed to race their best horses against the best the Arabs could provide. The Arabs agreed, and told the British to lay out the course as they chose. When the day of the race came, the Arabs arrived and asked where the race was to begin, and where it would end. They were shown a strip on the desert marked out by the British for a race of three furlongs. "Oh!" said the

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astonished Arabs, "we thought the race was to be run for *three days!*" The journey toward the rediscovery of prayer is not for those who intend only to be "sprinters." It is for those who are prepared to "go the distance"; and, as with all heroic enterprises, the ardors and the heartbreaks of the course are matched by the joy and richness of the reward.

Prayer as the Adoration of God

WE HAVE BEGUN our inquiry into the life of prayer by describing prayer as personal communion between God and ourselves. God, of his own will, reaches out to us, and we respond as best we can to his overtures. As we venture further into this communion, we are led to ask whether anything more can be said as to the content and the manner of our response. Our communication with other persons includes a variety of moods, feelings, attitudes, and acts, which grow in richness and in discrimination as they grow in depth and reality. We should expect this to be our experience when we enter into living communion with God. But we should expect our life with him to be infinitely richer and more varied than our communication with other persons, because we are not limited in it to our own human resources. We have available the resources of his own infinitely

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rich and wonderful Self. No matter how clearly we believe we have grasped the meaning of prayer when we have entered upon its practice, we will discover, again and again, how very poor and inadequate has been our highest anticipation compared with the richness of experience into which God is leading us as we continue to pray.

Prayer can never be confined to rigid patterns. It will always be carrying us on to those uniquely creative levels of communion with God that he alone makes possible for us. Nevertheless, we must try to bring this fresh, and sometimes astonishing, variety of experience in prayer into some order. Although an orchestra may sound a great chord when every instrument is played in harmony at once, the melody and movement of a symphony require that the various parts be rendered in sequence and right proportion. Effective praying requires us to see the moods and attitudes, the intentions and expressions of prayer, in an order and relationship that most fittingly represents the nature of our communion with God.

What is the first act of prayer to be? If our true relation to God is to be acknowledged and expressed, what mood and what intention govern our entrance into communion with him? The Westminster Catechism answered this question in declaring that "the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." That declaration sometimes has been interpreted in ways which seem strangely inappropriate to the glorification of God, and quite devoid of any joy on the part of those who praise him. Nevertheless, it has the ring of truth

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and the support of authentic experience. Although, as we shall see, prayer includes modes of communion, such as confession, thanksgiving, and intercession, the life of prayer in its fullness has been found by those who have persevered in it to begin in the adoration of God, as well as to end there. Our "most fundamental need, duty, honor and happiness," says Friedrich von Hügel, "is not petition, nor even contrition, nor again even thanksgiving, . . . but adoration."¹

When we speak of prayer as the adoration of God, we immediately run into difficulties. For one thing, this kind of prayer would seem to be the level of prayer toward which we might aspire, but which we cannot hope to understand or practice until we have been engaged long in the life of devotion. Ought not a chapter on adoration come logically at the end rather than at the beginning of our discussion?

There is some truth in this comment. Dr. Johnson remarked that the New Testament was "the most difficult book in the world, for which the study of a life is required."² A whole lifetime may not be long enough for us even to begin to know God, and to respond to this knowledge of him by our adoration. But adoration can begin at once, where we are, without waiting until we have reached a more advanced state of prayer. A young man can begin to love a young woman almost the first time his eyes light upon her, even though the full realization of that love will require "the study of a life"—and more. So the adoration of God becomes for us both the beginning and the goal of the life of prayer: the first act undertaken with whatever love

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and power we now command, and the last act left us after a long life offered in the praise and service of his glory.

The second difficulty is less easily removed. It arises from the fact that the word "adoration" stands for a mood, an attitude, a direction of our thoughts and feelings toward someone or something, about which we know very little today. The word "adore" appears almost solely in popular love songs, where it usually implies that the lover has been smitten with an overpowering passion for the object of his infatuation. The song seldom suggests, or intends to suggest, that he is trying to "feel or express reverent admiration," or to "worship or honor as divine"—as the dictionary defines the word.

Not simply the word "adore" but the thoughts, feelings, and acts it connotes have been eroded by our experience. Our emotions are those of another, and more superficial order. We are "shocked," "thrilled," "excited," by scandals, exploits, disasters, inventions, or "gala extravaganzas." The object of today's astonishment disappears before the headlines proclaiming tomorrow's marvel; and that, too, soon gives way to the Super-model of the future. Gilbert Chesterton wrote, as a motto for an exhibit at the Chicago fair of 1933, that men will never starve for want of wonders; but men will starve for want of Wonder. Our impoverished capacity for wonder, for standing in awe, for feeling ourselves in the presence of Mystery too great for our comprehension, leaves us almost powerless to enter into the attitude of adoration toward God, or to find

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appropriate ways for the expression of our reverence and awe.

This loss of the power of wonder, from which adoration arises, may be illustrated in our changed attitudes toward the natural world. The orders of creation, which were once the source of the feelings of mystery, of our dependence upon a higher power, of intimations that God "moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform," now have become for us the raw phenomena for investigation by science and the raw material for exploitation by technology. Contrast the wonder of the Psalmist considering "the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained," and the sardonic lines of a modern poet:

*Oh sing no more of the moon, poets,
No more of the moon,*

.

*We have measured her round and through
the middle,
We have weighed her mass,
And spectroscopical evidence points
To the absence of gas.³*

In bucolic mood, we imagine the farmer going forth to sow his seed in the faith that God will give him harvest and increase. But his own mind, while he is sowing, is much more likely to be preoccupied with chemical formulas for fertilizers, or for treating his seed against smut and rust; with weather, cutworms, and installment payments due on his tractor. Even our penchant

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for taking snapshots of scenery gratifies our desire to somehow exploit nature for our satisfaction, more than it preserves for us those moments of wonder and awe we have felt before the marvel and beauty of creation. The very temper and habit of our modern life has worked to alienate us from the mood of adoration as it was felt by earlier generations.

These difficulties, however, may well justify us in beginning our journey toward rediscovering prayer by turning first to the practice of prayer as adoration. As we shall see again, adoration is the true beginning and end of all our prayer. Still more, because of the urgency thrust upon us by our own times, we turn to this form of prayer in the hope that we may restore, before it is too late, our capacity for wonder, for awe mingled with love, without which we will never come to know and to love God, or to be able to pray to him at all.

Adoration and Our Knowledge of God

Let us try now to say more fully why adoration is our first act of prayer. In the first place, only when prayer becomes adoration are we responding to God in a way that even begins to be appropriate to all we believe that he is. We have said that God exceeds all our power to describe or define him or his attributes. But this does not prevent us from trying to say in our most thoughtful terms all that we do know of him. Even when we fail, we have the comfort of knowing that far greater men than we—artists, poets, musicians, saints—also have tried to set forth the beauty and

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splendor and mystery of God and have found their genius still a poor thing for their purpose. In one way or another, all confess with the Psalmist, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it" (Psalm 139:6).

To begin with, we are moved to adore God by the tremendous creative power we ascribe to him. Proving the existence of God from evidences taken from the various forms of creation has nearly always turned out to be a dubious enterprise. Baron von Hügel describes a contemporary scientist as having "that curious, more or less credulous hankering after finding God and the soul at the end of a telescope or microscope."⁴ But such attempts to prove the existence and power of God seldom carry conviction to others. Our faith concerning God, his existence and his creative activity and power, must arise first from our personal meeting with him.

Once that faith has taken root in us, it can be nurtured and strengthened by the contemplation of his creative power, whether we view it through telescope or microscope or with the naked eye. We may see God's creative energy in the sheer immensity of the cosmos, whose spaces must be measured by incomprehensible billions of light-years and whose stars are numbered in untold millions in each of its galaxies. Or, we may wonder at the strange drama of their motions and revolutions, held together in an order of such staggering complexity that Sir James Jeans is led to say, "The universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine," and Albert Einstein finds the

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formulas of pure mathematics displaying a unity he can liken only to "a wonderful symphony, of which our universe is the expression." Or, we may stand some calm, crystaled night gazing up at the infinity of darkness where the candling stars shine, and know the profound meaning of the Psalmist's exclamation, "The heavens declare the glory of God!" (Psalm 19:1).

Our excursions with the microscope will give us no less cause for astonishment and for awe before the creative brilliance of God's workmanship. An able chemist observes that he finds something marvelous in an element as common in our world as water. He was not thinking of the beauty of water as we see it in the blue depths of a placid mountain lake, or tumbling over the brown stones in a brook's bed, or thundering its foaming power against the headlands at sea. He had in mind those characteristics of water that make it so serviceable in the economy of the earth: its high volatility, which makes possible not only steam power, but the whole cycle of evaporation and rainfall, without which the earth would be desert; its peculiar way of expanding just above the freezing point, without which ice would always sink to the bottom of oceans and lakes and streams, soon turning the earth into a global "deep-freeze"; or its incompressibility, without which it could never be used in a hydraulic press, or give us pressure at our faucets, or bear ships upon the surface of the ocean. Although this chemist no longer finds it easy to think of God in conventional religious symbols, the inexhaustible wonder that comes to him as he contemplates the marvelous properties of water inspires

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him with a moving sense of the reality and the infinite greatness of God, the creator.

Infinite as the power and intelligence of God appear to us in his creation, and greatly as these move us to adore him, there are other attributes of his being which inspire us further to adore him. As our knowledge concerning God increases, we are led to think upon his *righteousness*—the purity and integrity of moral purpose and judgment, which characterize his nature and his government of our human existence. It is not easy, in our time in history, to maintain that all the events which take place in human affairs are controlled by a righteous God. Few individuals find it possible to live very long without having some doubt whether God asserts any moral authority over the events of their private lives. In the Second Inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln could declare that in the sufferings of both North and South there could be discerned no “departure from those divine attributes which believers in a living God always ascribe to Him,” and that “as it was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’” But this is a height of insight into the nature of human experience to which men seldom rise, either in their understanding of the affairs of nations or of private individuals.

We cannot speak of the righteousness of God without being thrown back upon the age-old mystery of evil in human existence, for which no rational explanation has ever been found. The religious answers to this problem have taken three principal forms: (1) to deny

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the existence of evil or, at least, to deny that its existence is anything more than illusion; (2) to seek to escape from it; (3) to strive for victory over it.

In the Christian faith, the last of these three alternatives is taken, and in a particular way. The Christian does not claim that at any present moment in human history, or in any specific experience, all evil is being punished and destroyed. He believes, rather, that in the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has triumphed over evil, and evil in its present irruptions into human existence has no enduring and final power over us.

The full meaning of this claim has been the subject of Christian thought and teaching through the centuries. It is not our purpose to enter into a fuller explanation of it here. We may remark at this point, as we will have occasion for saying later, that the rediscovery of prayer cannot be separated from our serious study of the teaching and meaning of the Christian faith, and our reflection upon it and appropriation of it as the ground of our own life.

Some aspects of this central Christian claim, however, can move us to deeper adoration of God, "who giveth us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ." There is, first, the astounding truth that this triumph of God over evil is not vindictive but redemptive in its intention and effect. We do not adore God because his righteousness triumphs over evil, injustice, or cruelty, with a kind of ruthless, irresistible power, dictated by some absolute logic as to what is good and what is evil. Unlike Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado, God does not

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have as his "object all sublime" to "make the punishment fit the crime." If we insist on this kind of rational justice as the solution for the problem of evil, we will never come to understand the true character of God's righteousness or to be moved to worship him. The drama of Job can teach us that.

The righteousness of God, rather, is to be understood in its relation to the crowning attribute of his being, his infinite and inexhaustible love. Mystery as that love may be to us, it is for this quality in his being that we truly adore God. Is it not just those events in the history of mankind wherein we discern something of his reconciling love, which assure us that God is indeed active in our human affairs? And is it not the absence of this redemptive power—or at least our inability to see it at work—that causes us gravest misgivings as to whether there can be a righteous God? We can accept Lincoln's assertion of the judgment of God falling upon both North and South because he is led from that to go on to say, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, . . ." Beyond that offering of amnesty and that plea for good will between peoples, we can hardly fail to hear the words ascribed to Jesus on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Only the powerful and triumphant are able to love infinitely, like that; and only the infinitely loving can use righteous power in a way that creates good, rather than evil.

But even the righteousness of God, exercised as love for the redemption of men from evil, must be paid for. This is the reason why the cross has been the central

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symbol of the Christian faith, and why all our adoration of God must be inseparably linked with our own willingness to live and act and suffer, in whatever way necessary, with Christ in this work of redeeming life from evil. Of this, and its place in prayer, we will have more to say later. Here we are trying to fix our minds upon the fact that it is this redemptive love of God for us, which the cross symbolizes, that connects our adoration of him with the most tragic and most perplexing aspects of human existence. In the midst of evil we can adore him for the power and love by which that evil is overcome, taking for ourselves the words of Isaac Watt's great hymn:

*When I survey the wondrous cross
Where the young prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

The Offering of Adoration

We begin our prayer with the adoration of God, then, because only through prayer of this kind can we fittingly acknowledge the creative power and wisdom, the righteousness and love, which we believe to be his nature. There follows the question of how we are to offer our adoration when we pray.

Here, a familiar psychological principle comes to our aid, and we will see later that it helps us, not only in prayers of adoration, but in all our acts of prayer. This principle states that not only are our actions the expression of our thoughts and feelings, but our thoughts

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and feelings can be quickened and clarified by the doing of the appropriate expressive actions. William James described the principle by saying that when we see a bear in the woods and are afraid and run, we are afraid because we run, even more than we run because we are afraid. Friedrich von Hügel had this principle in mind when he exclaimed, "What a curious psychology which allows me to kiss my child because I love it, but strictly forbids me to kiss it in order to love it!"⁵ In many experiences of our daily life we discover how true it is that our actions help to induce our states of feeling and to clarify our thinking, as much as that our feelings or thinking leads to expressive actions.

In our endeavor to offer God our adoration we will find this principle of great value. In seeking to express our worship of him, we will gain in understanding, in clarity of insight, and in the faith in him which calls our adoration forth. To learn how to adore God, we must begin to adore him.

A fruitful point of beginning can be found in trying to recall those moments and experiences in our lives when, as we see them in retrospect, the presence and wonder of God have come upon us with a sense of undeniable reality. Not all of us will have the kind of compelling experiences which Jacob Boehme called "the shattering stroke of God's grace"; but none of us has been without some hint of his glory breaking in upon us. Some of these experiences remain in our conscious memory and return to our minds whenever we take time and intentionally recall them. Others have slipped away into the store of our unconscious mem-

ory, and are brought back to mind through their association with some forgotten sensory experience. The hero in Marcel Proust's novel *The Remembrance of Things Past* dips his crumb of madeline cake in his tea, and from the taste of it is led to recall the memories of his childhood long absent from his conscious mind. All of us hold some key by which the door of forgotten events may be unlocked, and we are allowed to enter again into the presence of God, as we once felt and knew him to be near us.

In adoration, as in other aspects of praying, we need to reflect upon our past experience, to recall these forgotten experiences, and to meditate upon their meaning until they take on again something of the light and the wonder they first brought us. Through them, God has been reaching out to us, however slow and dim-witted we have been in our responding. All our praying waits upon this work of reflecting upon our past until it becomes valid and rich in its meaning; and this is especially true of adoration. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that this is a task too difficult for most of us to undertake. In our simplest effort quietly to think back upon our past and to bring again to mind when and how we have had some sense of God made real to us, we can find a center for our first motion toward the adoring of God. It is possible for any of us to recapture these first hints of his wonder, and to begin adoring him for what he has shown us of himself.

Having begun, then, with such experiences as we have at hand, we can move on to deepen and enrich our adoration by the use of appropriate means and

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symbols. Many of the religious symbols and the means of expression which have served for vivifying the prayers of men in the past no longer fit readily to our use. We may have before us the double task of trying to give God the adoration we feel for him through the recovery of some of these older channels of expression, and through the shaping of new ones which can be adequate and appropriate for our purpose.

One aspect of this task is that of finding language in which we can appropriately express our adoration. In our simplest, most spontaneous prayers we try to put our thoughts and feelings into words, seeking to communicate with God as we might with persons we know. Yet not entirely so: however satisfactory our everyday speech may be for communicating with other people, it often will strike us as too barren, too light in its nuance, to serve our praise of God. The true language of prayer is poetic language; and the use of poetic language calls for a power and a fluency we do not readily command.

We will be helped in our prayers of adoration, therefore, by acquainting ourselves with the great verbal expressions of praise and wonder which have come to us from men whose gifts so much exceed our own. The magnificent praise and adoration in the Bible can lift us in our own endeavors: Psalm 103, or Psalm 145; Isaiah's vision in the temple, 6:1-9; the closing chapters of the drama of Job, 38-42; the lofty prologue to the Gospel according to John, 1:1-14; or the splendor of the vision of the church gathered around the throne in

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Revelation, 4:1-11 and 7:9-17—these to mention only a few.

Great passages of poetry also can help us to quicken and to express our feelings of wonder: Coleridge's "Hymn to Mount Blanc," for those of us inspired by the sight of the mountains; or Wordsworth's "Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey," or the *Divine Sonnets* of John Donne, and the poems of George Herbert; or later, but hardly less moving for its brevity, such adoration as Gerard Manley Hopkins pours out in his sonnet "Pied Beauty":

Glory be to God for dappled things—

For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;

Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;

And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)

With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise him.⁶

We do not turn to these resources in literature simply to give our praying more external beauty or felicity of expression. We turn to them, read, ponder, and soak our thought in their beauty in order to gain a new power of expression for our own praise of God; and, in so doing, to increase the depth and strength of our desire to worship him. As we read aloud and take into our minds the rhythm, imagery, and music of these passages, we will find them springing up for us again and

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again when some experience of special vividness moves us to adore God. They become interwoven with our own aspiration toward him and through the language they inspire and shape for us, we gain in the power to express our own prayers in a manner that is uniquely our own, and that with some fitting beauty sets forth all the reverence and wonder we feel toward him.

Beyond this enrichment of the language of our adoration, we can find help through using symbolic means for this same purpose. "The highest things can never be spoken," said Goethe; and this is inescapably true of our prayers. When words prove inadequate or unavailable as means for inspiring and expressing our feelings or intentions, we turn to pictures, gifts, gestures, actions, which go beyond the communications of language. A rich symbol has the power both to convey and to evoke our inner, and often hidden, emotions. Although the use of symbols can deteriorate into a kind of superstition, or into mere formality, the neglect of their use will force us to rely too largely upon our intellects in our praying, and will shut from our prayer the great power and richness of our emotional life.

Among the symbols that can be helpful to us are those which appeal to our sense of sight. Even the most casual of tourists is moved by the paintings, statuary, and architecture of a great cathedral. We need to participate in the public worship of God as it is offered in the church, in order that our private life of devotion may be re-enforced, and our adoration fittingly set forth in the kind of symbolic representation which only a church can provide.

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But we can also provide ourselves with some modest aids to adoration by appropriate visual symbols in our own private surroundings. A religious picture on the walls of our bedroom or office; a simple cross on the fireplace mantel, where our eyes can fall upon it as we rest them from too long gazing on the embers; or, if our circumstances are fortunate, the fitting of a small room as a place of prayer—these can quietly but powerfully quicken and strengthen the mood of worship. We need not restrict ourselves to conventional religious symbols. A gnarled bit of seadrift picked up on the beach; the crystalline splendors of a piece of rock; a tree seen from our window, standing unmoved in sun or storm; or from that same window a span of landscape, or the long crest of distant mountains—these may speak to us of the marvels of God's creative love and move us to his praise.

The depth and reality of our prayers of adoration require, then, that we continually feed our minds and emotions with what Matthew Arnold called "the best that has been thought and said." Reading poetry, making music, painting and actively looking at pictures, as Lewis Mumford has pointed out, are indispensable to any kind of growth in the life of the spirit. We are hardly ready to conclude that prayer, especially prayer of adoration, is beyond our power if we are content to give ourselves indiscriminately to the reading of popular magazines, looking at any program that comes next on television, or being incessantly "on the go," as though motion, not emotion, were the real source of meaning in our lives.

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Again, we are not concerned here to acquire some sort of aesthetic excellence in prayer. We are speaking, rather, of the simple but urgent need of finding means by which we can fittingly declare our praise of God. A woman on the fifth floor of a cold-water flat, setting a geranium precariously on the window ledge to warm and bloom under the sun, can make this her act of adoration as truly as a genius might when he spreads some divine beauty upon his canvas. Means for our praise are at hand for us all; but we must learn to use them, to cultivate and nurture them as part of our life of prayer.

And beyond these symbolic means, with their appeal to our senses and their evocation of a richer emotional response, we can employ the specific acts of praying. The principle which we have described earlier—that by action we help to stimulate thought and feeling—has its particular bearing here. For this reason many find that kneeling can hardly be excelled as an appropriate posture for adoration. The less we may feel disposed to adore God, the more this very act can serve to bring us into this attitude. At various times the church has taught that the position of standing (now in our life unhappily practiced by few people except soldiers on parade) is the most fitting posture for the praise of God. Still others, incapacitated by illness for these attitudes of prayer, have learned with the Psalmist to

*Commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still.
Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your
trust in the Lord.*

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Our very weariness, our inability to rise and pray, can lead us to that open surrender of ourselves to God which is among the highest acts of adoration.

Silence as Our Final Adoration

In our first ventures upon the prayer of adoration we will need to make use of the means which we have been describing: spoken prayers, symbols, actions. As we continue in this kind of praying, however, we will be drawn more and more into the kind of prayer that becomes only silence. Here, we venture beyond the images that impose themselves upon our minds from the outside, and from those words, scenes, and imaginations that rise within, and find ourselves waiting, simply and adoringly, in the presence of God.

The experience of such awe-filled silence is not unknown to us. A scene of moving grandeur, the final chords of a symphony, the utter hush of the countryside under moonlight—these leave us, as we say, “speechless.” We are, with Keats,

*Like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific, and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise,
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.*⁷

Out of such moments we understand why the Psalmist writes, “Be still and know that I am God”—as if, indeed, we ever could come to know him fully in any way but through waiting in silent adoration before him.

At the beginning the practice of silent adoration may

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not be easy. Later we will have further suggestions to make for the practice of silent prayer in this and other aspects of our praying. While it is true that only as our life of prayer grows in depth and simplicity are we ready to go very far into this realm of silent adoration, yet it is quite possible for us to make some ventures into it from the outset. In the beginning it will be wise to combine our periods of silence with other forms of praying: spoken prayer, meditation upon God and his action in our lives, or the contemplation of such helpful symbols as we have described.

In drawing upon aids such as these, we can save ourselves from wandering off into daydreams and empty fantasies, and can bring about some concentration of our attention. We will need to learn how to dismiss distractions that insist upon breaking into our minds while we pray. A quiet room, secure from interruptions, can be of great help, but many of us will need to learn how to withdraw into silence while walking the street, riding to work, or going about our day's employment. If we persevere, however, we will learn how to be "gathered inwardly" into the stillness, where we can wait upon God, and return to him our loving gaze, and adore him with our whole heart.

To enter upon the rediscovery of prayer through the practice of the prayer of adoration would appear to call us to the most difficult kind of praying before we have learned much of how to pray at all. But the difficulty rises up so imposingly before us only when we think of adoration as the end and completion of our prayer, not as its first steps. A mountaineer may well despair if he

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gazes on the immensity of the peak he hopes to climb and supposes that he must reach the summit in one gigantic leap. But while he is still far off among the foothills, he must fix his gaze upon the immaculate fastness of the snowbound crest, or he will lose all sense of direction, all motive for going resolutely on.

The adoration of God is the beginning and the end of all our prayer, as it is of all our life. But it can begin for us any time, anywhere, with such means, words, signs, as we have at hand. Whenever some hint of his infinite power and glory and love breaks in upon us we can respond to his overtures, saying with John Donne, "Blessed be God that he is God, only and divinely like himself." ⁸

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TO THE QUESTION "Does God have anything to do with us?" our prayers of adoration can give us an assuring answer. As we think upon him and worship him for what he is, we discover that he not only can have something to do with us, but out of his great love he seeks continually to draw us more closely into fellowship with himself.

But the more we gain assurance about this first part of our question, the more we find ourselves troubled with the second: "Can we have anything to do with God?" As the realization of God in all his holiness grows upon us, there comes home to us with increasing clarity the recognition of what we are as human creatures. In the Bible, this sense of the disparity between God and men is set forth again and again with vivid realism. When Abraham bargains with the Lord for the preservation of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, he ap-

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proaches the Lord with all the craftiness of an old hand at making a favorable deal; but at the same time, he is quite awake to the presumptuousness of what he is doing: "Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). The same recognition of the vast difference between God and men is expressed in the more mature and awesome declaration that "no man shall see God and live" (Exodus 33:20).

If taken as dogmatic and arbitrary statements of the distinction between God and ourselves, these affirmations in the Bible might not seriously distress us, or deter us from going on with our praying. Our difficulty arises from the fact that they are not arbitrary; they are verified in the experience of all men and women who take prayer seriously. Prayer continually enhances our vision of God and our insight into ourselves. From that vision it can become increasingly clear to us how such a Being might choose to have relations with us; but it also becomes increasingly clear how strange, not to say presumptuous, it is for us to believe we can have something to do with him. The cry of Job becomes the cry of all men whenever the presence of God breaks in upon them in overwhelming fullness:

*I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees thee;
Therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.*

We are required to ask ourselves, therefore, how we can hope to continue in the way of prayer if the outcome of

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our praying will be only this growing consciousness of our inability or our unworthiness to enter into communion with God. In a sense, we could continue to adore him, but even our adoration would become more and more a worship from afar, as a mountain sometimes seems to rise in majesty as we travel farther away from its base. While such adoration would have its power to ennoble us, as it might also serve to give due honor to God, it would be far from that loving communion that seeks always to draw us into closer fellowship with him. The full practice of prayer requires adoration as its first motion; but it requires much more than that. We must have the desire and the freedom to come into communion with God at every level of our human need, desire, and aspiration; and such freedom, as we know in our own relations with people, grows in breadth and depth as these relations grow in intimacy, trust, and reverence.

How are these two apparently contradictory facts about prayer to be reconciled: the fact that as we pray we should grow in the depth and intimacy of our communion with God; and the fact that as we pray we become more acutely aware of the difference that separates us from him? We propose to consider this problem in the present and following chapters in two ways. First, we will try to understand more clearly the nature of the distinction that divides us from God, for only as we can have this understanding can we hope to go on intelligently and devoutly with our prayers. Second, we will then consider the implications of our human condition for the practice of our prayer in its various aspects

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of confession, thanksgiving, and petition. And at the end of the book we will return again to the subject of our growth in prayer as an increasing consciousness of the reality of God in our lives.

Our Nature and God's Purpose for Us

Let us begin by describing more clearly the characteristics of our human nature and the terms of our human existence which seem to lie at the bottom of this separation between God and men. The words we are to use have lost some currency in our day, but they stand for the plain realities about which we must now try to think. Let us use them, trying to give content to them which can be verified in our own experience.

Human nature, as it is understood in the Christian faith, contains two opposing characteristics. On the one hand, the human person is seen as potentially capable of almost infinite fulfillment and attainment. "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" asks the Psalmist, and he answers, "Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels!" Something of the same view of man's infinite possibility underlies Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . the meek . . . the merciful . . . the pure. . . ." No man rises to these states of blessedness, but the implication is that so far as God's intention in creating man goes, this is the kind of person he would have us become. The same sense of infinite fulfillment is suggested in Jesus' saying, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

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If such be God's intention for us, it may be said also that on occasion we have some intimations within ourselves that this perfection is the end for which we were intended. The ambitions of a young man may be composed of an odd collection of aims and desires, from the most immediate and childish to the most idealistic aspiration of making something noble and heroic of his life. Somewhere in the conglomerate of his soul, not yet hardened into rocklike fixity, can be traced even this holiest of yearnings after God. In himself he may say on occasion, as young André Gide wrote in his journal, "May the time come when my soul, at last liberated, will be concerned only with God!"¹ And as the years go on without that aspiration having been fulfilled, he will take for himself the regret of the poor woman in Leon Bloy's novel, "There is but one sadness, and that is for us not to be saints."²

The life of prayer which we seek to discover for ourselves is possible only because this hidden yearning moves us to seek communion with God, in order that his intention for our life might be fulfilled. That yearning is for no sequestered life whose holiness is made possible by, or consists in, its detachment from the full round of living in the world of responsibility, work, joy, and sorrow. It is, rather, for this fullness, goodness, and perfection somehow to become the essential character of all that we are and do. The great vision of what we are meant to be, as it is held up before us by the Christian promise of God's intention in our creation, becomes the source of our motivation, our aspiration, and our strength for living.

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But against this understanding of man as being capable of a fulfillment far beyond his present state, we have to set sharply the truth that we do not rise to that fulfillment. Rather, we seem bent upon making it impossible and upon doing what we can to prevent the intention of God being realized in us. "If we did not expect any good of man," wrote Fénelon, "no evil would astonish us. Astonishment comes from having thought humanity worth something." ⁸

While we are potentially meant for an infinite fulfillment, this potentiality can never be regarded as inevitable, or as something that we can achieve by our own effort. On the contrary, human inclination seems to work against this outcome; and when the fulfillment of human nature is accomplished, this is the work of God himself, who not only can bring to perfection the creature he has planned but can and does overcome the destructive consequences of our own inclinations. It is with this tendency on our own part to disrupt the purpose of God in us, and this power and will of God to overcome the harm we do and to restore us to himself, that our prayer must be concerned.

This view of our human situation has been described traditionally under two strong terms: "Death," and "Sin." By death is meant not simply the end of our physical life, but all those limitations and circumstances which work to confine, thwart, or destroy our existence, and which reduce us to creatures at the mercy of forces and circumstances that work to bring us to oblivion. By sin is meant not simply the breaking of some moral standard, still less some convention which an "enlight-

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ened" age no longer regards as important, but rather that whole attitude and posture in which men stand with respect to God and his purpose for them, and his claim upon them. Its essence is our pride in ourselves. Its source for the most part is our refusal to accept the conditions of our existence as human creatures, and our attempt to live, think, and judge as though we were gods.

These are difficult and abstract ideas, which may seem to be remote from our little sphere of living and to have little or nothing to do with our praying. But we must try to see how terribly true and concrete and immediate they are, and how fatefully they can affect our human existence.

Death and Our Human Limitations

Let us begin with the idea of death as an elemental fact of our human state. William Hazlitt wrote of the young men of the nineteenth century, "No young man ever thinks he shall die. He may believe that others will, or assent to the doctrine that 'all men are mortal' as an abstract proposition, but he is far enough from bringing it home to himself individually." ⁴ The securities of the nineteenth century may have encouraged young men in that illusion. But in our own century, when millions of young men have confronted death day after day, the illusion seems to persist—not because we are secure, but apparently because we do not want to face the precarious condition of our present existence. Human life seems, for us, to be growing continually more pros-

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perous, pleasant, and gratifying. When the Communist-led throng shout, "Ten thousand years to Comrade Mao!" we dismiss this as arrogant folly. But the difference between that view of our existence and our own may be a matter of degree rather than kind. We do not expect to live ten thousand years. We are quite confident that we will live as long as we will wish, in order to "get out of life" what we want.

But although we are unwilling to admit the fact of death in its final shape, we are quite ready to admit and to protest against some of its disguised forms, as these impinge upon our lives. From the strictly human point of view, everything that in one way or another puts limits about us, or takes from us some opportunity, or handicaps us in our search for self-realization, must be said to be one manifestation of this essential human condition, which we may call our "human finitude" or, more directly, our death. To be born of our own particular parents and ancestry, whose genes so largely determine our physique, health, temperament, appearance, mental capacities and talents, is to find oneself already shut about by restrictions and limitations that will shape for good or ill the whole course of one's life. To grow up in poverty, on the wrong side of the tracks—or on the wrong suburban estate; to suffer a crippling disease or accident; to be poorly or wrongly educated—all of these circumstances, so powerful in determining the particular kind of person each of us finds himself to be, are in one way or another the form and power of death in our lives.

Added to these private circumstances are the forces

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of the larger events of history. Here we discover ourselves often under the control of events beyond our resources to influence or to escape. In our day, more than one young man must have been stirred to cry with Hamlet,

*The time is out of joint; O cursed spite
That I was ever born to set it right!*

Or he may find himself in a civilization so far gone into decline that he can only utter the words young Sidney Lanier wrote of his generation in the South after the devastation of the Civil War: "With us pretty much the whole of life has been merely not dying." ⁵

The same sense of our creaturely finitude, the limitation of our hope by the iron conditioning of our lives, invades our thinking from another source. Few students make their way through the fragmented and scientifically oriented course of a college education today without becoming affected by a view of human life which makes us out to be creatures severely limited by our earthy, bodily heritage. Man, according to one scientist, is a "twenty-eight jointed articulated self-balancing biped." At first sight, this definition appears to touch only upon certain characteristics of our body's structure, and has meaning only for such elementary activities as walking, standing, sitting. But the more we understand the complexities of our bodies, the more we appear to be determined in our whole personality by just such elementary facts as the number of joints between our bones and our power to maintain our equilibrium while standing erect. It now is a matter of speculative hope

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whether some of the more violent perversions in human behavior may be corrected by the use of drugs or by operations upon certain areas of the brain. If these speculations are well founded, we may be on the threshold of discoveries which promise relief, freedom, and recreation to those who have been warped and afflicted through their physical limitations.

But such advances in the knowledge of the human body and its relation to the human personality serve, too, to make us more conscious of the way we are bound by the limitations of flesh and blood, mind and emotion. So it comes about that all of our progress in the achievement of our aims, in the improvement of our fortunes, in the overcoming of physical need, illness, or weakness, is never without its grueling sense of uneasiness. Behind that anxiety lies the recognition that in spite of what we are, do, achieve, or make, in the end we are limited in our power, in our permanence on the earth.

This sense of our situation in human life strikes home sharply often at those very times when our hopes, longings, and aspirations seem most worthy of an abidingness beyond the reach of chance or oblivion. When two young persons confer with their minister to arrange their wedding service, they will sometimes ask that he omit from the ritual the phrase "till death us do part." The minister must then say that although the phrase might be omitted, the fact cannot be changed. Barring an extraordinary coincidence, this is the inescapable end of their marriage: one will survive the other; death does part us. But he will understand also the motive which leads to their request. The life upon which they

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are about to enter is to them too precious, too much touched with love and promise to be at the mercy of death's casual intrusion. With a spirit of wistful defiance, they want no acknowledgment made of that inevitable end.

Here, then, is the first fact about ourselves as we enter into prayer to God: we are at best earthly creatures, filled with infinite yearnings and potentially meant for a life that, like the path of the just, might grow "brighter and brighter unto the perfect day." Yet all that longing, soaring aspiration seems, from the standpoint of our human resource, to be at the mercy of all the mischance, weakness, and evil which find their fullest power over us in the fact of our death. In view of this condition of our existence, the question we have to ask about our praying takes this form: "How can we, who are earth-bound and finite creatures, have fellowship with an Infinite and Eternal God: and how can we have this communion in such a way that all this earthly life can become, not the negation of the meaning of our creation, but its affirmation and fulfillment?" We must ask that question both for ourselves and others. In the chapters to follow we will try to see how prayer can be an affirmation of a kind of life that overcomes our limitations and our death.

Sin and Our Reaction Against Our Death

Yet the condition of human existence has another characteristic which adds a somewhat deeper dimension to this problem raised by the fact of death. In the

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view of human life set forth in the Bible, the fact of death is always joined with this second characteristic, and in a sense which implies that each is in some way an outcome of the other. According to this view, as we have said, the two primary characteristics of our existence are Death *and* Sin. "The wages of sin is death," wrote Paul, and though some have questioned his grammar, few have been ready to deny his conclusion.

Taken literally, this biblical view of there being some casual connection between the two may be difficult for us to understand or to accept; but taken seriously as a description of human experience, the truth of it can be at least convincingly illustrated. Because of its crucial bearing upon our practice of prayer, we will try to show its working out in our own lives.

Put all too briefly, the meaning of sin and its connection with the condition of death can be summarized in this way: Although we are creatures set about with finite limitations, we are not content with the fate that seems implied for us in this circumstance. Therefore, we attempt to take our destiny into our own hands. Our resentment against our finiteness and our proud assumption of competence to work out our own destiny constitute a defiance of the will and purpose of God in creating us. The Bible always regards this defiance as the essence of our sinning. Such a view of our sinfulness, of course, goes far deeper in its understanding of our human nature and behavior than the regarding of "sins" as the infraction of moral codes, at times hardly separable from conventions.

It has become a sport of sophisticated thinking to

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scoff at the idea of sin, as though the very word belonged to the vocabulary of an older, puritanical generation, and has no real currency in our speech. Some years ago, a writer in a popular magazine observed that in our culture "sweat" is no longer a nice word; so, we avoid not only the word but the thing also. We are inclined to say the same of the word "sin": it is no longer nice. Unfortunately, however, although we may avoid the word, we do not seem to succeed any better than earlier generations in avoiding "the thing also."

The kind of sin with which we are concerned here is not to be passed off so lightly. When men discover that they are finite creatures, living in a world where mischance, indifferent physical force, and the savage and violent irruptions of evil in human nature and human events always threaten and sooner or later triumph, they can take one of three attitudes. First, they can seek to ignore our situation by escape into an interpretation of existence where this life has no significance. "Nirvana" in Hindu religion, and Bertrand Russell's defiance of fate in "A Free Man's Worship," are widely differing but essentially similar forms of this escapist answer. Secondly, and in direct contradiction to this first view, there is that attitude which does not seek to escape or deny the facts of our existence; but does seek to interpret these in the light of faith in a Power that transcends them, and can bring us to transcend them. Upon this second answer, our whole discussion of prayer in this book is premised. Without such an answer the full range and depth of prayer would be denied us. We will see why this is true in the chapters that follow.

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There is a third attitude, however, which really stands between these first two, and which can help us to understand the connection between sin and death, and the bearing of both upon our praying. It may be called, as we have already hinted, the attitude of pride and self-confidence, on the one hand, and of fear and resentment, on the other. Faced by the conditions of existence which seem to thwart the possibility of rising to a fulfillment beyond this stage of living, men grow resentful and bitter toward life, and unconsciously at least toward God, who is ultimately responsible for their having to live under such limitations. At the same time, men grow self-conscious concerning their potential worth. Out of this self-consciousness, pride and reliance upon themselves become their dominant attitude and the controlling motive in their behavior. This pride is by no means the same thing as reverence toward themselves as creatures of God, who are of infinite worth because he holds them to be so.

The tracing of this theme of the sin of men in the Bible could occupy us far longer than we have time to pursue it here. The stories of Adam and Eve, of the Tower of Babel, of David's seduction of Bathsheba, are but random instances in which it is portrayed with great dramatic power. The problems of conscience and of justice, arising from the arrogant behavior of proud men, wring the hearts of the prophets and of the author of the great 73rd Psalm. In the same way, much of the world's literature has wrestled with this stubborn and defiant disposition of men in rebellion against fate—or God—as it may be variously understood. Dostoevski

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makes the theme of his novel *Crime and Punishment* the question whether one human being has the right to take the life of another human being whom he regards as unfit longer to live. Even when Raskolnikov fails in his demonstration of this theory, his emotion is more that of chagrin at his failure than of remorse over the murder he has committed.

Further illustration of this sinful bent in our fundamental attitude toward life can be found in the descriptions of human personality given by depth psychology. Though various systems of psychology differ in their terminologies and interpretations, nearly all concur in recognizing that our behavior consists in feelings, desires, motivations, and imagery far greater in extent and potency than ever gets into our consciousness. The "unconscious," or "subconscious," to use two of the more common terms, has become recognized as the seat for vast ranges of our mental and emotional life.

More than that, there is fairly general agreement that significant aspects of this life-beyond-the-conscious derives from the crucial "traumatic experiences" which befall us very early in life. These consist in essence in the child's shocking discovery that the world and all the people in it do not revolve around his individual existence, and are not created for the service of his needs or desires. That discovery is really the child's first encounter with the fact of his creaturely finitude, as we have called it—or his death. Almost before any one of us has come to have a memory, we individually have had to face and to find our answer to the discovery that we are meant for ultimate death. Already we have

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enemies and live in a world indifferent to our desires. We can be and we are betrayed: we must now look out for ourselves.

When we considered how we might begin our adoration of God, we saw the importance of trying to recover from our hidden memories the experiences of his presence that once had moved us to wonder. The same practice of recall can help us in trying to understand how this early discovery of our peril in life can plant in us the seed of rebellion against God, and of the fear, and the pride, that spring from that defiance. Although a thorough-going recovery of that past may not be possible for us without the aid of someone expertly trained to guide us in our explorations, some measure of self-understanding is possible to those who will take the time, make the effort, and pay the cost which this recalling demands.

Anyone who will turn back into his earliest memories will find among them that incident, that fragment of experience which, for all its apparent triviality, has lingered on through years, and even now can touch off its original feeling-tone of mingled fear, helplessness, anger, and defiance. At the root of that memory lie the memories of other and earlier incidents, all going back to some original event with its traumatic discovery of our helpless finitude, and pointing forward to a thousand experiences and incidents in the subsequent years when we have felt and responded to those same emotions, far beyond anything the immediate situation justified. At the risk of greatly oversimplifying the facts, it may be said that a great part of our behavior through

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life consists in our continuing efforts to resist, deny, and make ourselves impregnable to the death, of which that earliest experience gave us our first fateful glimpse.

Jesus pointed out the implications of this truth about our behavior when he declared that the rightness or wrongness of our actions must be judged by their interior motives and attitudes. Even those capabilities in the human person that are meant for infinite development can be taken over and made to serve as defense and weapon for our fear, resentment, and self-assertive pride. Love becomes possessiveness; and sex, one of its humble but enriching expressions, is turned to undisciplined self-gratification. Generosity becomes calculated selfishness—good “public relations” used to win friends and influence people to our own advantage. Joy is coarsened into self-congratulations; sorrow, with all its power to transmute us into saints, is cheapened into self-pity.

All our sinning does not spring from this single root. There seem to be irrational and unpredictable sources of action in men, as in all of created nature, which lead to the doing of evil, beyond anything our reason would lead us to think possible. But here is root to sprout and sustain evil enough for our undoing. Sin grows out of our fear and resentment against the limitations of our life, and our proud illusion that we can defy the conditions that bind us to earth and death. From this root spring our anxieties about ourselves; our fear and weakness in facing crises; our coveting of the things others have; our craving for reputation, publicity, excitement, and luxury, for love that is really pampering

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of our self-regard, and for success that consists in the inflation of our egos. All these are troubling enough for any one of us to manage in his own private life. But they become disastrous when they intrude into our common life with others. And when a whole world becomes inhabited with individuals driven, by the fear of death, to act as though they were gods, then we have such a tragic, imperiled, and despairing world as the one in which our generation is living.

And now we are ready to turn from this excursion of our thought into the conditions of our human life and to ask what these facts of our death and our sin have to do with our prayer. We began by acknowledging that our first act of prayer was the adoration we offer to God as the vision of himself opens upon our minds and hearts. We came then to realize that this vision, as it broadens upon us, makes us more conscious of what we are as men. Although God himself seeks to draw us into communion with himself, we are forced to ask whether we can have communion with him, being what we are. Difficulties, doubts, contradictions, seem to arise in us when we try to pray, and we must find some way of overcoming these.

How can we hope to pray when we are defiant of the will of God in setting us in the midst of life as we find it, or when so much of our endeavor is spent in trying to set matters right according to our own idea as to what our existence should be? How can we give thanks to God for the joys and benefits we receive if basically we are fearful and resentful toward having to live at all, or if we insist in using our capacities, resources,

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and opportunities to inflate and gratify our own self-centered will, rather than as means by which we might realize God's will for us? Or still further, how can we seek the help and mercy of God for ourselves or for others if we still harbor hostility toward him for having created us, or toward other people whom we hold accountable for our predicament?

As long as we cling to the attitude that God has given us life on terms that we reject as unfair, and unworthy of our potential existence; as long as we feel that God himself is responsible for what we have to suffer of chance and frustration and thwarted desire, how can we come to have communion with him at all? It is with these questions that the following chapters are concerned.

Prayer and the Forgiveness of Sin

IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTER we examined the temper of self-assertiveness, which constitutes our primary sin against God. We acknowledged that as long as our lives are dominated by such proud or resentful self-will, our prayer would be disrupted by doubts, distractions, and contradictions. When the ship of the Ancient Mariner lay becalmed in the rotting sea, he

*. . . looked to heaven and tried to pray:
But or ever a prayer had gusht,
A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust.*

That whisper was not some impulse to impurity insinuating itself into the midst of his prayer. Rather, it was a taunting sense of guilt for having killed the albatross which had followed the ship and "made the breeze to

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blow." The destruction of the symbolic bird had been an act of ruthless self-assertion, as had been Raskolnikov's murder of the old woman in the pawnshop. Not until the mariner surrenders his hostility toward the world of creatures that God has made, and is able to call the water-snakes that swim around his becalmed ship "happy living things" and to bless them out of the "springs of love" that "gushed from his heart," is he able to pray again.

We are not surprised that this should be the outcome. In the Bible, inward rightness toward God is always the precondition for living in communion with him. "When you spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when you make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood!" (Isaiah 1:15). Shocking that must have sounded to the ears of a people who were confident that they were on good terms with God because their national economy was prospering! Jesus pressed this same principle of inward rightness even further: "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift . . . first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

The deepest interior motives are in question here. Antagonism toward others (and their hostility to us), as we have seen, springs from the fact that we attach to them as persons the basic resentment we have come to hold against our limited life—and ultimately against God—for having circumscribed us by our creaturely limitations and our inevitable death. Until this hostility is

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rooted out, how can we enter into fellowship with him when the very essence of communion between God and ourselves is love?

We are prepared, of course, to recognize that the base and violent sins a man commits will cut him off from intercourse with God. When Macbeth has murdered Duncan, he smears the hands of the drugged and sleeping guards with the bloody dagger. But when he hears them muttering prayers in their sleep, he cries, "Wherefore could I not say, 'Amen'?" When the king in *Hamlet* has poisoned his brother, usurped his throne, and married his queen, he goes into his chamber to pray, only to find that

*My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go!*

The offense here is too great to be overcome lightly by a moment of prayer. This we can easily understand.

In the light of what we have been saying about our interior motives, we are prepared, also, to understand how our inward feelings of anger, lust, or revenge can raise the same barriers against our praying. Charles Peguy published his great poem on Joan of Arc, only to have the critics attack abusively both the poem and the author. He wrote later to a friend, "Would you believe that for eighteen months I could not say, 'Our Father'? 'Thy will be done' was quite impossible to say. . . . I could not accept His will." And he found it still more impossible to say, "Forgive me my trespasses as I forgive." The words, says his biographer, "would have stuck in his throat."¹

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But for many of us the obstacles to prayer raised by our sin will not reveal themselves in violent crimes or overpowering hostilities. They will come rather by a slow accumulation of acts, impulses, moods, and attitudes, inconsequential in themselves but expressive of the same essential insistence upon having life on our own terms. All of us, says Professor Allport, develop a certain *style* of living that is all of a piece, and more than the sum of any isolated identifiable actions.² Surely this principle is as true for that trait of behavior which we call "sin" as it is for the flare of individuality in a great athlete or the artistic performance of a great musician. Not simply our particularized thoughts, words, and deeds constitute our offense to God; but the *totality plus* of which they are but minor expressions. In Browning's poem, the duke is unable to say, to his "last duchess," "Just this or that in you disgusts me; here you miss, there exceed the mark"; but the young girl still produced an effect upon him of spontaneous joy and glad openness toward everybody which he could not endure. The total "style" of our life, not the particularities of our behavior, constitutes the basic sinfulness with which we have to deal.

From the point of view of the problem our sin creates when we try to pray, this intangible but total pattern may have consequences more grave than if we had committed some outright act of moral defiance against the will of God. In fact, our occasional outbreaks of violently self-assertive actions sometimes reveal the true nature of our interior life. They expose the long accumulation of selfish desire or hidden resentment which we

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harbored within us, and which has had far more to do with our daily behavior than we are willing to admit. When we come to pray, we might well imagine God saying to us, in Emerson's words, "What you are shouts so loud I cannot hear what you say!"

Prayer Requires and Brings Forgiveness

We know what will be required, then, if we are to enter into communion with God in prayer. The wrongs we have committed must be set right; the impurity and self-indulgence to which we yield must be rooted out; the tempers and attitudes to which we give way must be overcome and replaced. But still more than any of these, we ourselves must become different persons than we have become under the drive of our own self-will. All this is imperative, we know.

Yet such making of amends for the past and such transformation of ourselves for the future is just what we find ourselves unable to bring about. A man firmly resolves not to fall into habits of indolence and self-indulgence, and after the model of Benjamin Franklin, devises for himself a plan of moral living which he believes will keep him busy and out of temptation's reach. Then he discovers that his very preoccupation with his moral scheme helps to keep the thought of the temptation alive in his mind, until suddenly the whole defense collapses and he is back where he started—and worse. A woman learns through saddening experience the havoc worked by her temper and resolves hereafter to suppress it at all costs. She keeps the good resolution

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for a time; but when the explosion does come, it comes all the more disastrously for having been suppressed.

More than that, there is something tragic about the fact that the best we can do to make amends and restore fellowship between ourselves and other people is always such an inadequate act compared to the wrong and the rupture we have caused. When we have broken down the good will that once existed between ourselves and someone else, nothing we ever do can make full repair—gift, apology, or kindness. These can be only tokens of our deep desire to set matters right. The true healing of the breach comes only when the offended party forgives the past and is willing to begin with us anew.

What is true for our fellowship with one another holds true, in an infinite degree, in our communion with God. The restoration of our fellowship with him in prayer requires the fullest inward rightness, the largest amends for what we have done, the highest determination to change what we are and to give ourselves wholly to the doing of his will. But all this we cannot achieve of ourselves, nor would it be a sufficient restitution if we could. Only the forgiveness of God, his canceling our sin toward him, and his willingness to begin with us anew can ever make possible our communion with him. This is the meaning, in the Christian faith, of the cross of Jesus Christ. The significance of the cross for our life of prayer we will speak about in a later chapter.

God alone can restore us to fellowship with himself. This is the deeper dimension of the truth we considered in the first chapter: God not merely seeks us—antici-

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pates our coming to him by himself coming to us—but he does so in spite of the fact that we so often are not seeking but fleeing from him, running off somewhere so that we can have things our own way. And our response to God's prevenient grace must take on a deeper dimension: we not only yearn for him and seek for him, but we do so both to adore him and to acknowledge to him how far we have resisted his will for our lives, and how much we need to be made new persons by his redemptive, forgiving love.

We come, then, to these two truths about our praying. As long as our sin separates us from God, we cannot get on in the life of prayer. On the other hand, our praying itself should be a means through which, in spite of our sin, we are brought back into fellowship with God and enabled to continue in prayer. We cannot pray until we are forgiven; and we cannot be forgiven until we begin to pray. Contradictory as these statements may appear, they really are but complementary aspects of the same truth. We shall see this when we consider how we are to pray in order to find ourselves restored to a living fellowship with God.

The Approach to Confession

Prayer which seeks to bring us back into communion with God through repentance for our sin is known as prayer of confession. In traditional liturgies for public worship, confession traditionally precedes the other acts of the service, on the principle that until we have confessed, and been forgiven, we are not prepared

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for further communion with God. Confession takes the form of a prayer, offered by the congregation, in which particular sins are not mentioned, but the general fact and character of our sinning is acknowledged and petition is made that God in his mercy will forgive us what is past and strengthen us to avoid further sin in the future. The sincere observance of this corporate, general act of confession can be of great help to us, as a counterpart to our life of personal prayer.

If our confession is to be an effectual means for bringing us into unhampered intercourse with God, however, we will need to go beyond this formal confession. We will need to come to grips with our interior conditions and problems in very concrete ways. We must combine the large sweep of general confession with the unique and particular needs of our individual lives. Such praying will require a much more exhaustive effort than the utterance, or repetition, of general statements as to our sinfulness. We must bring ourselves to that inward surrender of self-will which allows God to restore clarity and health to our interior lives.

How are we to approach praying of this kind? Remembering always that what we do can be only our response to all that God is seeking to do for us, let us attempt to describe an approach to confession that can help us to acknowledge our sin and to remove those barriers between ourselves and God which distract and thwart us when we try to pray.

There are three general suggestions to be made for our approach:

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1. *We will need to abandon any idea that we can pray only when we are in a properly "spiritual" frame of mind.* To defer any prayer, and particularly our prayer of confession, because we do not feel ourselves to be in an appropriate mood for communion with God, or, especially, in a fittingly humble and penitent frame of mind, is to put the life of prayer at the mercy of transient states of feeling. Sooner or later, that practice brings us to the point where we do not pray at all, because we never are sure we are properly prepared to do so.

The feeling that we are not in a properly repentant mood may be the best indication of our need for confession. To defer, moreover, is to assume that what we are going to do depends upon ourselves for its effectiveness, rather than upon God. What is required is that we should affirm our faith in God's power to forgive and to restore us, by entering into communion with him even when we are least presentable, most begrimed, and most troubled by our daily life. To confess our sin is to make "an act of faith"; and for that, the time is always right.

2. *We should not regard confession as an act of torturous self-examination,* whose power and sincerity can be measured by the number and extremity of the sins we confess. Lord Wariston, a devout young man of the seventeenth century, describes himself in his diary as being God's ". . . pore, naughty, wretched, useless, passionate, humerous, vayne, proud, silly, imprudent, phantastick barrowman . . . the unworthiest, fillthiest,

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passionatest, deceitfulest, crookedest, backslydingest, rebellionest, perjurddest, unablest of all thy servants!"^a No doubt he meant to be sincere, and possibly all these self-deprecations were true. But this cataloguing of his sins seems tainted with a measure of satisfaction at the thoroughness of his self-condemnation. We do not help to restore ourselves to the practice of vital prayer by magnifying our sin or aggravating our sense of remorse. Especially is this true with respect to reviving our feelings of shame or compunction for some serious fault we committed long ago. Once our confession is fully and heartily made, and we have received the sense of God's forgiveness as our own, the past closes for us and we are to have done with it. Of this, we will say more, later.

3. *Confession must be accompanied by appropriate acts of amends and changes in behavior and attitude*, insofar as we are able with God's help to bring these about. When the tax collector meets Jesus, he does not stop to admit that he is a sinner. He goes to the heart of the matter and cries, "If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold!" Making amends requires insight into the nature of our wrongdoing. The result of our prayers of confession ought to be the awakening of that insight, and a prompting to do whatever is required to make amends for the offense we have committed.

We are not to expect that by the exercise of one simple confession all the difficulties and perplexities which arise from our sin will be removed, and all our tendencies to wrongdoing be overcome. But we are to expect

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that by the confession of our sins we will at least be *on the way* to doing better from this point on. We are not to expect that our prayer of confession will bring us to a condition where we are no longer tempted and no longer susceptible to sinning; but we are to expect that we shall gain in the power to resist temptation and that we will be able to deal with the newer and more subtle temptations which beset us as we move forward in the life of prayer.

These, then, are three general principles which bear upon the attitude with which we are to approach prayer as confession of our sin. They can help us to steady ourselves to the work such prayer requires, and to see that such praying is no occasional activity in which we engage when we feel particularly conscience-stricken over some wrong we have done. If we are to do all that is required of us to bring ourselves to the point where God can forgive us, and re-create us, and bring us back into communion with himself, then we are called indeed to a lifelong practice of this particular work of confessional prayer.

The Way of Confessional Praying

From these general suggestions, let us now turn to consider the manner in which we can practice the prayer of confession. Four major principles can help us:

1. *Use every occasion of making confession and amends.* We have been describing sin as the persistent

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tendency to a self-centered orientation of life, motivated by our fear and resentment toward all that threatens our self-will, and by our proud confidence in our own ability to direct our destinies. But such a description should not lead us to overlook the fact that we do commit definite acts from time to time which we know to be contrary to the will of God for us—we lie, draw the “color line,” take advantage of others for our own profit or pleasure, indulge ourselves in momentary and dissipating amusement, grow angry and vengeful. The list is a familiar and embarrassing one; and there are to be added to it those desires, impulses, motives, which we dare not name to others. Sword and conscience alike rust for want of use, and when we have committed sins whose thrust upon our conscience will not let us rest, we ought to follow as quickly, searchingly, and honestly as we can with a wholehearted confession to God that we have done wrong, are sorry for it, and need his forgiveness.

Such confession need not wait upon the gaining of wisdom or power in the practice of mature prayer. The important consideration is that we be heartily sorry for our sin and that we say so as quickly—and as often—as we can. No one should expect to get very far in the life of confessional prayer who is not using every occasion his sin requires to make such confession as he is able to make. The admonition to “let not the sun go down upon your wrath” can be extended to include all our sins; we are not to let time wear away from us the true sense of guilt and repentance they evoke, but to repent at the earliest possible moment.

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2. *Strengthen the desire to be free of sin and restored to fellowship with God.* Our account of the nature of our sin, in the preceding chapter, makes clear that we have to do here with no superficial change in our behavior, but with the transformation of the deepest elements of our personal being. If our prayer of confession is to serve in this strenuous work, we will need to give to it every charge of urgency and power which we can add. "Blessed are those who *hunger and thirst* after righteousness," said Jesus.

Traditionally, the motivation for the confession of sin has been found in contemplation of the terrors of hell, and the bliss of heaven. These considerations probably fail to move us today because we no longer find convincing the images in which these terrors and blessings have been pictured. But their truth should not be lost to us simply because we cannot respond to their details. The terror and anguish which the thought of a literal hell once aroused can still be found in the descriptions of the interior plight of men and women, such as are provided in the case reports of a psychotherapist, the autobiographical speeches made at a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, the drab recital of hatred, betrayal, and love destroyed that goes on day after day in divorce courts, or the profound analyses of sin in human life found in great literature, such as Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, or Georges Bernanos' *Joy*.

Sooner or later almost everyone comes to a point in his life where the interior anguish he undergoes, simply from the numb realization of what he is in himself and

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has been to others, exceeds any torment that a literal hell could impose. "O wretched man that I am!" cries Paul—and for all of us. We ought not deprive ourselves of the powerful motivation to confession that comes from the reflection upon our sins just because we live in a time when a benign relativity about morals and a cosmic astronomy leave no place for a literal hell. Our sin is terribly real; and its consequences are full enough of suffering and anguish both for ourselves and those who innocently are the victims of our sinning. To shut our eyes to this basic fact is not the part of wisdom or maturity, but of timidity, and of a jaunty irresponsibility toward the meaning of life.

But even more, we need to contemplate the vision of a new, and higher, purer life, which has been symbolized in the traditional idea of heaven. Such contemplation may have greater power to move us to confession than the thought of our sin and its consequence. Henry Scougal wrote, "The deepest and most pure humility doth not so much arise from the consideration of our own faults and defects as from a calm and quiet contemplation of the divine purity and goodness."⁴ By centering the habitual attention of our lives on the vision of God and his holiness, the purity and selflessness of Jesus, the humility and joy of Francis of Assisi, and the noble though far from perfect lives of brave and good men and women in history, in literature, and in our daily society, we can help to kindle the powerful desire to give room in our own lives for the sanctity which we see in them. We grow numb to our sin, content with ourselves as we are, because we isolate our-

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selves from the challenge and the inspiration we ought to be finding in the lives of the great, the heroic, and the pure, and because we deprive ourselves of the overpowering effect of the vision we might have of the righteousness and glory of God himself.

If our practice of confession is to come to grips with the fact of our sins, we shall have to carry it on in a strenuous and heroic way; and for that we shall need every added prod, leading, and incitement that can be brought to bear.

3. *Open ourselves to God with the fullest frankness, honesty, and self-surrender.* At the first level of confession, in which we acknowledge our fault in committing a particular sin, this principle is self-evident and hardly need be mentioned. But the principle involves a much deeper kind of self-disclosure. It requires that we try to put into words our fullest confession of what we are; what we have done; most of all, what are our interior motives, desires, feelings, purposes. If we are to do that, we shall have to go beyond the confession of our guilt for particular acts and seek to recover, relive, and then confess our guilt for all that buried life of the past in which our hostility to God—and our defiant assertion of our own will against his—first began to express itself.

When we are ready to begin this work we shall find the doors opening upon the past in various ways. We can take note of the vague states of uneasiness which hover around the edges of our consciousness. As we try to relate these with a particular circumstance, we often will discover that we have taken hold of a thread which

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leads us further and further back into our earlier experience. The immediate cause of our state of tension may be the recollection of something we have said, some impulse to which we have given way, some mood of anger, humiliation, or fear, touched off by the remarks of another person. Incidents of this sort, and the states of feeling provoked, occur for us every day. The significant point about them, which we so often overlook, is that the degree and persistence of the feeling aroused can be out of all proportion to the cause. Once a state of feeling has been touched off, it expands and attaches itself to other incidents which originally had no connection with the mood in which we now find ourselves. At the end of the day we complain, "*Everything went wrong today*"; at the end of a week, "*This is the way things always go for me!*"

Yet if we take these states of feeling seriously, they can become to us warnings and pointers toward the re-discovery of the interior condition of our life. If a particular incident today has provoked us to feelings of mingled fear and hostility, or has led us to resort to self-indulgence in compensation for the anxiety we are having to bear, we can ask when, and for what cause, we gave way to these forms of behavior in the past. As we reflect upon these past experiences, our memory of them clarifies and we begin to see how today's moods and behavior are only the most recent expression of a continuing pattern of feelings and acts. And if we pursue the thread of our past courageously and honestly, we shall begin to see how much of our life through the years has been only the re-enactment on a new stage,

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with new scenery and a new cast, of the same original drama of our anger and fear, our despair and defiance, that was enacted when we first discovered our earth-bound destiny and rebelled against it.

This rediscovery of our past is seldom achieved in its completeness, and never by one simple excursion through the hidden chambers of our memories. As we have said, few of us can do it to any great extent without the help of a more experienced guide. But each time we attempt to unravel as far as we can the devious course of our past, we gain some further insight into the center of our life—our strivings to remake our destiny according to our own desire, our resentment that life—God—should have placed us in a universe, a society, a home, so unfriendly to our ambitions; our fears and anxieties for our own safety; and all the gross or subtle ways we take to humor ourselves and to make amends for what we have to suffer.

Hand in hand with this opening of our memory upon the past comes the crucial work of recognizing our responsibility for the way we have responded to our situation, and for acknowledging before God that we have sinned against his will by trying to serve our own. As we proceed in this course, the way may grow rougher. Old emotions, desires, impulses, which we had forgotten or had assumed we had outgrown, are now released and explode with new intensity. When that occurs, our prayers of confession may become for us turbulent and painful indeed! Yet this is precisely what it means to open ourselves to God with the fullest frankness, honesty, and self-surrender.

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The example of the psalmists comes to our help in such prayer. Passages in certain Psalms, read from a Christian point of view, strike us as falling below the standard of conduct which we suppose our prayer ought to manifest. The Psalmist may parade his own righteousness before God (Psalm 26); or complain bitterly because God seems to have deserted him (Psalm 22); or call upon God to punish his enemies and tormentors (Psalm 35); or seek to align himself favorably with God by professing a perfect hatred of wicked men (Psalm 139). None of these postures and attitudes seem to us to be fitting as true Christian behavior either toward God or our fellow men. But deeper reading of the Psalms suggests that the Psalmist is praying in the way we have been trying to describe: he pours himself out before God, with all his pride, bitterness, fear, hatred, self-righteousness, and self-pity in full view. And we shall sense, too, that this is not all. There is more to his prayer that he may leave unsaid, but that he, nevertheless, seems to take for granted. Having opened the very depths of his life to God, he now waits for God to have the last word, to set right in him what is wrong, and to restore him to the "joy of His salvation." "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Psalm 139).

So, true confession brings us step by step to the recognition of what we are; and then the humiliating, painful, but necessary acknowledgment of all our interior life before God. When that work is done, we wait upon him to move in upon our being, and by the quickening

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sense of his mercy toward us and his power to make us new, to strengthen us for the life he has set before us.

It need hardly be said that praying of this kind requires time and the right occasion. We should not try to make our confessions every day at this deeper level. It will be most necessary for us to find those intervals in our life when we can have the time, free from daily responsibilities and distractions, and can prepare ourselves adequately for the work such confession imposes on us. This need will bring us to consider the practice of making retreat, which we will discuss in a later chapter. In the meantime we ought to have great patience with ourselves—and with God! The clarification of our interior life and the transformation of ourselves as persons will not come about overnight. We shall try and fail often in our endeavor to change our ways of feeling, thinking, and acting. God has his wisdom and purpose for us and we must wait for it. A new life cannot be “prefabricated”; it must be *grown*.

4. *Accept the forgiveness God offers us.* The confession of sin, as we have said earlier, must not be thought of as a practice of torturous introspection or morbid self-reproach. Our purpose in confession is not to discover how wretched we are, but to find release and healing from the condition of life in which our sin takes root and thrives.

Yet it often comes about that the attempt to make a full confession leads us into spiritual malingering. We are ready to admit the self-centeredness of our past life; but we are not ready to acknowledge that we need not

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continue in that course. We are ready to concede that God must judge us for our sin; but we are not ready to believe, and to act on the faith, that he forgives us. Our want of faith in this respect becomes the last line of defense, behind which the old ego prepares to do battle for its existence. Unable to assert its rule over us in any other form, it now insists upon having the last word by bemoaning the hopelessness of our sinful condition.

Nor is this kind of self-solacing remorse confined to the fictional drunkard who weeps at the thought of the wrong he has done to his loving family and the hopelessness of his own besotted soul. It constitutes one of the way stations for all who engage themselves seriously in the venture of coming to terms realistically with the essential, and subtly deceptive, character of our self-centered life. Its not infrequent expression will be heard in the phrase, "I can never forgive myself for what I have done." The three first-person pronouns are significant!

But true confession takes its bearing from quite a different goal than that of simply probing into the depth and expression of our sin. Its true aim is to bring us to renewed communion with God, and to place us where his forgiveness can work to free us from the past and recreate us for the future. Indeed, we can hardly enter into the practice of confession in any purposeful or helpful way without accepting at the outset the faith that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9. RSV).

The failure of confession to bring about a true change

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in the quality of our living often can be traced to this failure to believe that God forgives us. A young woman who had allowed herself a rather large measure of "liberty" before her marriage became increasingly despondent, after her marriage, when her home continued to be childless. She could not escape the conviction that her childlessness came as punishment for the kind of life she had led in her earlier years. She got into the practice of going to her minister, to pour out to him her grief and disappointment and to recount again all the sins of her past for which she believed she was now paying the price. On each of her visits the minister had tried to assure her that God forgave her past self-indulgences and that he did not forever continue to exact retribution. These counsels had little effect in reassuring the young woman, and as the interviews went on, it became a question whether she came really to confess her sin or to indulge herself in self-pity as she relived her old life. One day the minister cut her short in the midst of her retelling of the story, put his hand firmly on her shoulder, and said, "Believe me, Eleanor, your sins are forgiven!" Not many weeks later the woman and her husband came to the study, radiant with the news that their first child was on its way to life.

It requires no expert insight into what is called "psychosomatic medicine" to explain the outcome. In one way or another, the creative powers available within us all wait to spring up into newness of life whenever we are ready to make our confession, to surrender our old self-exploitative goals and desires, and to offer ourselves back to God for the fulfillment of the life he designs us

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to have. And here, faith and action, surrender and consequence, work together so closely that we can scarcely say in what order of time they follow each other. There is a sense in which we must say that in order to be forgiven we must believe we are forgiven; or, that when we are at last ready to acknowledge our egocentric life, we are already on the way to being set free from its control. "In that thou hast sought me, thou hast already found me" is true nowhere more than in prayer as confession of sin and as receiving the forgiveness of God.

The practice of the prayer of confession, then, becomes in the fullest sense a *life* of prayer. It means a daily dying to self and a coming alive to God. Death and sin are the conditions of our human existence; but they are not its final terms unless, by our own self-will, we surrender ourselves into their power. The alternative is to seek to yield that citadel of our interior life to God by confession to him, in the confidence that when we do so, he forgives us and we are made new by his spirit.

The Joyful Acceptance of Life: Prayer as Thanksgiving

IN A LETTER to a friend, Katherine Mansfield once wrote, "I have just finished my new book. Finished last night at 10:30. Laid down my pen after writing, 'Thanks be to God.' I wish there was a God. I am longing (1) to praise him; (2) to thank him."¹ Everyone but those whose lives have been strangely and constantly filled with bitterness will understand her meaning. In the joy and elation we feel at having accomplished an aim we had set, in being chosen by our associates for an honor, in hearing the first avowal of love from one we have come to love, on first taking to ourselves for our own a "thing of beauty" that will be "a joy forever," we know ourselves to have been given an unearned blessing. When this happens we are not content until we have shared our happiness with other people, and—if our

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sense of the source of this good be strong—until we have given thanks to God.

The same strong impulse to share our relief and offer our thanks will overcome us when we have escaped danger, or recovered from critical illness, or welcomed home someone we love from the sufferings of war, or seen the world moved a little nearer peace and humane living. Even a long life filled with much hardship will be summed up, by the person who has borne and struggled through its troubles, in the acknowledgment, "I have much to be thankful for." Eva Herman, a German woman sent to a Nazi concentration camp for helping Jewish refugees escape persecution, begins her story of imprisonment with these words, "It may seem paradoxical for me to say that I would not have missed the experience of these two years of my life in a Nazi prison for anything. But it is so."²

The desire to give thanks seems to be one of the ineradicable promptings of the human spirit. Whether the cry springs to our lips impulsively or comes as the sober conclusion to reflection upon our experience, the good that falls to us remains incomplete and unappropriated as our own until we have responded with our gratitude. Even were we skeptically indifferent to any kind of religious faith, there come times when we have to make Katherine Mansfield's cry our own—"I wish there was a God. I am longing (1) to praise him; (2) to thank him!"

The offering of prayers of thanksgiving, therefore, becomes a significant part of our life of prayer. If our relations with God in any way resemble the deepest and most vital of our relations with other persons, then the

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strongest of our impulses of gratitude become richer and truer when they are directed not simply to other persons like ourselves, but to the Person in whose goodness lies all our good, and of whose joy we share these fragmentary rejoicings. The parables of Jesus are true to our need when the woman who finds her lost coin and the shepherd who finds his lost sheep run eagerly to their neighbors, crying, "*Rejoice with me!*" (Luke 11). If we are to come into a full practice of the life of prayer, we must quicken our sense of thankfulness for all the good which God bestows upon us, and we must enlarge and strengthen the spontaneous impulse to give thanks into a persistent attitude of mind and heart toward him.

Christian Thanksgiving a Fundamental Attitude

The life of Christian prayer, however, requires us to go beyond the offering of thanksgiving for occasional circumstances of benefit or deliverance. Enriching and necessary as such prayers of gratitude can be, they sometimes are limited in their scope and arise from motives that leave us far from that full response to the goodness of God which should be ours in a life of communion with him. In Chapter 3, we considered the reaction we make to the discovery of the finite limits within which our life is set. Although we are earthly creatures, bound and conditioned by a thousand forces which we are powerless to change or control, we reject such circumscription of our existence and set out to remake things according to our own will and purpose.

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Once that pursuit has begun, we are easily persuaded to be grateful for every advantage or favorable circumstance which furthers our aims. In the case of the individual who makes no place in his thought for God, such gains often become the cause of self-congratulation. This is especially the temptation of the "self-made man."

But the temptation besets others who, in one way or another, consent to give God some recognition in their scheme of things. They find their need to give thanks adequately satisfied after the manner of Dorothy Parker's well-to-do Mrs. Whittaker: "God had always supplied her with the best of service. She could have given Him an excellent reference at any time."³ Nor is this kind of acknowledgment restricted to material advantages only. "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men," prayed the Pharisee, himself a man of no small spiritual attainments, as all might discover who attempt to imitate him in fasting and tithing (Luke 18:11). An individual may be moved often to give thanks for what comes to him; but his essential motive in doing so may still be more to congratulate himself and to satisfy his own ego than to acknowledge his dependence upon God and to render him praise.

The self-centered character of such prayers of thanksgiving is revealed more sharply when they are contrasted with the response the same individual makes toward his misfortunes and troubles. A father is moved to pride and gratification when his son graduates from college; two years later the son is killed in an aerial dogfight, and the father can only say, "What have I left to live for?" A mother is filled with happy gratitude when,

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after the uncertainties and tensions of young womanhood, her daughter becomes engaged to marry. But before the wedding can take place, the girl is killed in a traffic accident; and the mother can only complain in bitterness, "How can God let this happen to *me*?" To give thanks to God when all appears to go well—which is to say, when all seems to go in accordance with our own desires and purposes for our lives—requires no great effort or intention on our part. But life does not always go well. "Most men," wrote Henry Thoreau, "are in a strange uncertainty about life, whether it be of God or of the devil." The authentic quality in our prayers of thanksgiving will be revealed by our choice between these two views of our life, and our consequent readiness to give thanks in all circumstances.

In Christian prayer, then, there is place and need for the offering of spontaneous thanks upon every occasion of joy and every impulse to express our gratitude. But these spontaneous prayers of thanksgiving have their true source in the fundamental attitude which governs the whole of our life and experience. To give thanks means, in this profound and controlling sense, that we accept the whole of our life with deep and reverent joy as the gift which God, in his goodness, has bestowed upon us. Browning's friar, Fra Lippo Lippi, full of the ebullience of the Renaissance, could say,

. . . . *This world's no blot for us*
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good.

The life of prayer as thanksgiving requires that we be able to make that our affirmation concerning the mean-

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ing of our existence—not from any vigorous confidence in the powers of human nature (though these are not to be despised; these, too, are the gifts and the means of God for our good), but from an overmastering confidence in the goodness of God's purpose in creating us and bringing us into life, in order that we might find our life in him.

In affirming the goodness of human life, in this fundamental sense, we make our answer to the conditions of human existence described in Chapter 3. How are we to respond to the inescapable fact of our earthly death—and the condition of our human limitations? The way we are tempted to take, as we have seen, is the way of defiance, fear, hostility, pride. Out of these roots sin springs up to take over the control of our thoughts, desires, and actions. The work of our prayers of confession, as we considered such prayer in the preceding chapter, is to unravel the skein of this self-assertive defiance, to open ourselves to God, and to wait for his healing power to bring us back to communion with himself.

But at the point where we are ready to make that kind of surrender of our past to him, we discover that we need also a new attitude and purpose for the future. We are required, from the point of our confession on, to let our lives be controlled by the intention of living according to the will of God for us, insofar as we can understand and follow his will. That means, of course, that we must be not only willing but eager to enter upon the rest of our life in the hope that we may live it to the glory of God and in accordance with his purpose

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for us. In a sense, the choice before us is always whether we will follow our own way—which is sin—or accept his way, which means to give thanks for the gift of life itself. The basic work of Christian prayer, as Emma Herman has said, is to move the center of our life “from Self to God.”⁴ In that work, the movement begun in our prayer of confession is caught up, continued, and made joyful in our prayer of thanksgiving. It is good, as the Psalmist declares, “to give thanks unto the Lord” (Psalm 92:1), but never more so than when, beyond all the occasional benefits he grants us, we are ready to accept from him the gift of *all* our life, and to give him glad thanks for that.

The Levels of Thanksgiving: “The Blessings of This Life”

In what ways, then, are we to offer our gratitude to God and enter into the life of prayer as thanksgiving? We can find help for our practice of prayer at this point by turning to the traditional Prayer of General Thanksgiving for guidance. The prayer reads:

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we, thine unworthy servants, do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and lovingkindness to us and to all men. We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace and for the hope of glory. And, we beseech thee,

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give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful; and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

It will be seen that the prayer expresses thanksgiving at three levels: (1) thanksgiving to God for "all the blessings of this life"; (2) thanksgiving for the "redemption" of this life into a life of "glory"; (3) the offerings of ourselves in service and loving obedience to God. Let us consider these in turn.

The prayer begins by thanking God for his mercy shown to us in all the blessings of this life. There is no note of self-congratulation in it; whatever good comes to us is credited to the loving-kindness of God himself toward all his creation. Because he is the source of all goodness, the prayer can affirm the goodness of this earthly existence in which he has placed us and sustained us. Food, friends, a day at the beach, a good book, automobiles, planes, milk shakes, penicillin, the endless catalogue of things, people, experiences, that contribute to the comfort and satisfaction of our need and desires, all are included in his providence, and therefore are to be included in our thanks. To give thanks to God is not to limit our gratitude to ethereal matters which can be considered properly "spiritual." It is, in Evelyn Underhill's phrase, to "combine spiritual

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passion with appreciation of a cup of coffee" ⁵—to love and praise God and to enjoy fully the satisfactions, varieties, and benefits of our earthly life, physical, mental, emotional, spiritual.

To accept the good things of our life in this manner, however, does not mean that we are to be irresponsible in our use of them, or free to indulge ourselves for our own gratification and according to our own desires. The Christian, like the Epicurean, should have a fine sense of appreciation for a cup of coffee. But for him, this appreciation is derived from quite a different source. The Christian not only believes that all the delights and satisfactions of this life are gifts from God, but he also believes they are given for a purpose. That purpose is not their immediate enjoyment, but such use as may bring us further on the way to the fulfillment of life which is God's intention in creating us.

Something of this intention is implied when the prayer gives thanks for "all the blessings of this life," and then goes on to give thanks for "the means of grace." Strictly speaking, the means of grace are regarded as the "sacraments," which are defined in the catechism as "outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace." In the Protestant churches, the sacraments are held to be two: baptism and communion. But the inner meaning of the sacraments flows over into other aspects of religious faith and action, until a "sacramental" significance attaches itself to every part of a Christian's life. All things that we need, use, enjoy, come to have this significance when we regard them, not as ends in themselves, but as signs of God's love to-

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ward us; and as the means by which—through the support of our bodies, the enlargement of our minds, the nurture and discipline of our emotions, the clarification and strengthening of our personal being—God prepares us, and leads us on into a new realm of existence in which we grow more fully into the image of Christ and into loving communion with him. It is no accident that the basic pattern of the central Christian sacrament, the Lord's Supper, should be drawn from one of the most elementary and immediate gratifications of human life: eating and drinking—and this in the companionship of other human beings.

When we give thanks, then, we are to offer them for all the blessings of this life, in just such concrete and personal detail as has been used to illustrate our problem. A sophisticated attitude toward the practice of prayer might regard these concrete expressions as childishly naïve; it might warn us against all sorts of error as to what, after all, is really a blessing. But Christian prayer has never shown much regard for this kind of sophistication, because it has struck beyond it to the more profound understanding of our relations with God. Before him we are "children," with the most elemental needs and the most naïve desires and judgments. To understand this, and to give thanks therefore in the fullest kind of concreteness, is not childishness but spiritual maturity of the highest degree. Unless we become as little children, we shall not enter the kingdom of God—this we have on unimpeachable authority.

Once we have come to see the sacramental significance of "all the blessings of this life," we are prepared

also to form a better judgment as to what our blessings really are. We can then understand that there is place in our thanksgiving not only for our pleasures, satisfactions, and achievements but also for our sufferings, disappointments, and trials. Growth itself is never possible without discomfort, struggle, and even pain. As the hemlock tree lifts its point higher, it prunes away its lower branches by tightening a cincture around them until the sap is cut off, the branches die, and at last drop to the ground.

In the kind of transformation of personality which God seeks to work in us, the simpler measures of natural growth hardly serve. As we saw in the previous chapter, the cutting out of the distortions of our personality, which we called sin, requires radical processes. These almost always call for very real suffering before they can do their work. Of all the resources given us for the transformation of ourselves, none is wasted more profligately than our misfortune and pain. In spite of the example of brave souls who have been made into heroes and saints by their use of their afflictions, we spend our whole strength in seeking to avoid pain; and when it cannot be avoided, we give way to complaint and bitterness. The succession of generations that has had to grow into maturity in the second quarter of this twentieth century, with its series of depressions, wars, and the consequent frustration of hopes, has been required to face this question of the "uses of adversity"; and to decide—not whether they will be found "sweet"—but whether these are to poison the whole span of

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their existence, or to become the "means of grace" by which God can transform us into new men and women.

To give thanks for our troubles, then, is also valid prayer. To do so does not mean that we believe God has deliberately assigned a particular affliction to us. But it is to make an act of faith that when suffering comes, then "in everything God works for good with those who love him" (Romans 8:28. RSV). In the story of creation, as recorded in the first chapter of Genesis, God completes his work, and then looks upon it, and "behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). To give thanks for all that comes to us in this life is to place ourselves within that judgment—to believe that God finds his work in creating us "very good"; and to take that judgment as our own guiding conviction about the meaning of our existence—joy and sorrow, achievement and defeat, fulfillment and frustration.

We shall find ourselves strengthened in this faith by the act of consciously naming over in our prayers the gifts for which we have cause to be thankful. When that is not easily done, as in the times of suffering, we can pray for wisdom and strength to accept and use as blessings those circumstances which we are not yet able to receive gratefully. The exhortation of the old hymn is sound Christian practice, even though its motive may appear somewhat naïve: "Count your many blessings, name them one by one; and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." The outcome of giving thanks for "all the blessings of this life" is something more significant than a pleasant surprise, like that of a man adding up his books to find himself wealthier than he had sup-

posed. The real outcome of naming our blessings is to grow into the sense of the sacramental meaning of life, in which all the good that comes to us is seen as the gift of God's mercy; and all the suffering as being still within his power to use for our good.

The Levels of Thanksgiving: "The Hope of Glory"

In considering the place of our common earthly experience in our prayers of thanks we have unavoidably had to anticipate somewhat the second aspect of the general prayer of thanksgiving: thanksgiving for the "redemption of the world," the "means of grace and the hope of glory." This phase of the prayer, which really begins with giving thanks for "thine inestimable love" and goes on to speak of redemption "by our Lord Jesus Christ," contains in these brief phrases the essence of the Christian faith. A full discussion of all that is implied is beyond our purpose or our space here. However, we can fix our attention briefly on one phrase which suggests the bearing of this whole content of Christian belief upon the view of life out of which our prayers arise.

What do we mean when we say that we give thanks for "the hope of glory"? We are prepared to give thanks for the blessings of this life because these appear to us to be fairly concrete and identifiable. But the "hope of glory" bears connotations of an "other-worldly" outlook; and in our time we have little regard for that kind of religious vision. We are preoccupied, in increasing numbers of people and to a state of pathological obsession,

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with guaranteeing to ourselves the necessities and amenities of this life. Out of this preoccupation has come great improvement in the lives of millions of people. As these lines are being written, a radio commentator is quoting a scientist as saying that "the field of nutrition is a vast, unexplored continent." No one can hear those words without being stirred by the prospect of what science may be able to do to protect the human body from the ravages of malnutrition and to improve the source of diet for the human race.

But in spite of the achievements and promises of such ventures into the improvement of "this life," the ends for which this betterment is sought continually evade us. Because they do, our efforts and achievements prove to be either irrelevant or downright harmful. The lengthening of our life expectancy raises the inevitable question, "*Why* live longer?" Unless the blessings of this life are somehow redeemed and transfigured by a "hope of glory," we may well doubt whether there is any convincing reason why we should be particularly grateful to them. The long run of human history should warn us that preoccupation with this life, on the part of one man or millions, proves self-defeating. Our attacks on the "other-worldly," the "visionary," the "idealistic," are made at the very time when we stand firmly grounded on the achievements which the "visionaries" of another age foresaw and made possible. The idealistic dreams of one generation become the commonplaces of later times. In the life of the individual, the discovery of meaning and purpose in his concrete, realistic, everyday experience finds its source and motive in the vision he

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has of a dimension of life that is beyond, and yet interpenetrates, the here-and-now.

Our prayers of thanksgiving have this significance for us then: that they become the means of our discovery, expression, and affirmation of a dimension of life which exceeds the immediacy of our common days. When we give thanks to God for the "redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ," we are declaring our faith as to the necessity for such re-creation of all our human existence, and as to the loving purpose and the power of God to bring that transformation to pass. We are, in effect, saying that all the hints, intimations, visions, and insights which come to us as to the real character of our existence have become the truth for us and for our living; we rejoice that this can be our faith and praise God that it is so.

Here, once more, the principle we have noted as operative in our practice of prayer comes into force. By the offering of thanks for the "hope of glory" that is in us and about us, we grow in our perception of it in every circumstance of our life. We find ourselves living not in the two spheres of "this life" and the "other-worldly life" but in the one life in God, which is at the same moment both present and earthly and yet eternal and glorious.

But this "hope of glory," this vision of another dimension to our life, is not something which consists in subjective states of elation and confidence within ourselves. It is a quality, rather, of the same experience of our meeting with God, of persons meeting with the Person, which has been the foundation of all our prayer.

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Our "hope of glory" is God and our sense of the eternal life is the consciousness of being in communion with him. Not the aura of a person absent, but the overpowering recognition of a Person present, leads us to rejoice and give him thanks. In that relation with God we might appropriate for ourselves, and our prayer, Shakespeare's sonnet. Though "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes" he "beweeps his outcast state" and "curses his fate," he remembers the beloved one.

*Haply I think on thee: and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising,
From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate.*

So the Christian in prayer, tempted to be grieved by his earthly circumstance, envious of others, himself "almost despising," finds himself, not with the memory only, but with the living reality of God present; and the lark of his soul soars to sing its hymns of praise. It is God's "sweet love remembered" that constitutes the real blessedness of our life; and it is the service of our prayers of thanksgiving both to offer our response to that love and to cause it to become increasingly more real and engaging within us.

Our prayers of thanksgiving, therefore, will go beyond the act of naming and being grateful for the concrete circumstances of life, and will find occasion for us to pour out in praise our love for God. Here our own spontaneous speech may serve; or, if we cannot find words for our thanksgiving, then how fully and nobly the Psalms can become our prayer. None will serve us better than the great 103rd Psalm. And beyond our

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speech, our yearning to thank God and praise him brings us into that silent and wrapt waiting in his presence, where he who knows our heart anticipates all we might strive to say. So, the prayers of thanksgiving, which began—in a sense, where our confession had brought us—with the affirmation of the goodness of life, now, in turn, bring us to the point where our thanks for the concrete gifts we receive have moved us to thanks for God's gift to himself, and so, back again, to that adoration of God, in and for himself, in which our praying began.

The Levels of Thanksgiving: "Show Forth Thy Praise"

When we have given thanks to God for all the blessings of this life, and for the redemption of this life into one filled with the "hope of glory," the prayer of general thanksgiving carries us back into the living of life itself. It prays that "we may show forth thy praise . . . in our lives, by giving up our selves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days." Once more, the practice of praying becomes the life of prayer. The offering of gratitude is not complete until we have returned to God the total life which he has created, preserved, blessed, and redeemed. This self-offering constitutes the moral quality of our giving thanks. Only in this way do we rise to the level of life where persons count more than things, where the relations of personal love displace possessiveness and self-gratification, where what vitally matters is

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that we shall love God and shall be held by his love for us.

Such ascendance in the quality of life is hinted faintly in the transformations that take place in our human relations. A young man and young woman may have to do with each other at various social levels, and for various motives—the pleasure of lively friendship, the prestige each borrows from the other's achievements, beauty, prowess, or social status, or such material considerations as income, design of motor car, or family connections. Quite possibly, two persons will marry with such considerations working consciously or unconsciously to affect their choice and acceptance of each other. But when such a relation becomes a "marriage of true minds," it has to surmount these mutually gratifying advantages and find its appropriate expression in the self-offering of each to and for the other. This self-giving will be motivated by the kind of love that wants nothing of the other but himself, for himself. There will be occasions often in such a relationship for one to give thanks to the other for this or that particular gift or kindness which has been bestowed; but every time such a gratitude is expressed, the relations between the two must be adjusted to a new foundation: the two persons must now either rise to the point where each is willing to give something more of himself to the other; or they will sink further to the point where each exploits the other, consciously or unconsciously, for his own gratification. The giving and receiving of gifts between two young people is always accompanied by a degree of nervousness as to "where this will lead," and properly so.

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With God, whose relations with us are infinitely greater in significance, power, and gracious love, the same principle governs. To say, "Thank God," even for some passing and trivial benefit that has fallen to us, is to place ourselves at the point where we must decide whether the fundamental motive of our living is to be self-satisfaction or self-offering. If we are not to use the mercy of God more and more as means to our own ends, we have no choice but to give ourselves up to his service, and to bring our lives, with his help, into that "holiness and righteousness" for which he intends us. To give thanks, then, is to accept the life God has given us joyfully and confidently, and to answer his loving-kindness with our own offering of that life back to him.

*O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good:
for his mercy endureth forever.*

Prayer as Asking and Receiving

IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTER we were concerned to see that our prayers of thanksgiving are an expression of our joyful acceptance of the life God gives us. In the faith that all good comes from him, we see and use every circumstance of life as a means of grace by which we are led on into a life whose essence is a deepening fellowship with God. This sacramental view of our existence stands in contrast to the self-centered view of life that is the root of our sin. As our prayers of confession become the means for digging out and destroying that rootage in self, so our prayers of thanksgiving become the means of giving ourselves back to God in service to his will, and in fulfillment of his purpose for us.

As we reflect further upon this movement of the life of prayer, from adoration to confession to thanksgiving, we will be brought to see that its full sweep brings us to that aspect of praying in which we ask God for all

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we need or desire, and wait for his answer. Prayer of asking and receiving traditionally has been called petition when it is concerned with our own requests; or intercession when it is offered for the sake of others. In some respects the two raise different problems; but essentially they are the same and we will consider them together here. The question we are now brought to consider may be stated in this way: When we have acknowledged our dependence upon the providence of God through our prayers of thanksgiving, dare we go on to ask for his continued help and generous provision for our lives? Are we only to wait passively for whatever God may give us, being thankful for whatever comes; or can we believe that he will respond when we ask for those things we have not yet received but which we need, desire, or hope to have?

In considering this question, we should recognize, first, that it may appear to have a curiously detached and speculative air about it. The truth is that people *do* ask God for what they want or need, without waiting to decide whether they have the right or privilege to do so or whether there is any reason to think their praying will do any good. This is especially true in time of crisis. On the other hand, it is with respect to this prayer of asking and receiving that the unreflective, undisciplined practice of prayer encounters its most troubling doubts and difficulties. The same individual who breaks out into prayer in time of danger, illness, or dire need often refuses to continue praying in more prosperous times because he is not convinced that "prayer is answered." At the beginning of our study of prayer we purposefully

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avoided the question "Is prayer answered?" because it could not be adequately considered until it is seen in the perspective of our total relationship with God. We now can return to it, and to the objections and difficulties that commonly arise with regard to prayers of petition and intercession, and consider the reasons for our believing that when we ask of God, we also receive.

Before going further, let us state briefly the fundamental principle upon which we will consider this aspect of prayer. The life of prayer, as we have been saying, comes to fulfillment in a life that is lived in vital, loving communication—communion—with God himself. The end and the promise of all our life, as we live it in this earthly scene and dimension, is to make possible that fulfillment.

Some illumination of our understanding of this communion will be found, all too imperfectly, in our relations with other persons like ourselves. In any such relationship, communication—communion—is filled with all the movements of each person toward the other which we have been attributing to the life of prayer: loving reverence before the mystery of personality; confession, and forgiveness, of wrongs done to each other; thanksgiving for gifts, for gracious acts, gestures of love, and for the offering of each self to the other. By an unpredictable rhythm of growth, pause, and renewal, the intercourse moves to deeper levels of fellowship. It can never approach its full realization, however, until it expresses itself also in the privilege each can assume of asking freely of the other whatever he is able to give.

We have described our communion with God in

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prayer as having this essential character of intercourse between persons, he being Infinite Personality, who seeks to draw our finite personalities into fellowship with himself. If that intercourse is to move into its fulfillment, it will require that we enter into the privilege of asking God for our needs and desires, and that he responds by answering our prayers. A relationship which gave us leave to thank God for all he does for us, but no freedom or encouragement to ask further what we need or hope for, would fall short of its fullest realization. The question "Is prayer answered?" therefore remains only one aspect of the primary question with which we began these pages: "Does God have anything to do with us; and can we have anything to do with him?" We have seen that even at the crucial point of our being forgiven for our sins, the answer to this question is still indubitably "Yes!" We cannot say less with respect to our prayers of petition and intercession without abandoning the whole life of prayer altogether. "Ask and you shall receive," said Jesus; and he did not mean by that simply to encourage us in a kind of autosuggestion, or wish-concentration, which might motivate us to go out and get for ourselves what we want. Rather, to ask of God is to be the tangible demonstration of our confidence that "it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!" (Luke 12:32).

The Difficulties Raised About Asking

With this fundamental conception of our relations with God in mind, we can now turn to examine some of

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the doubts and perplexities confronting us when we present our prayers of petition for ourselves and our intercessions for other people. None of these difficulties are new; but the mental climate of our time may have made us more acutely conscious of them than would have been true in earlier generations.

1. *The Difficulties in Natural Law.* "How can God answer our prayers in a universe governed by law?" Would not a universe whose course could be altered in accordance with the whim of human beings prove to be so capricious as to be meaningless, if not dangerously chaotic? Or, could we really worship a God who, after the manner of ancient deities, is able and willing to disturb the orderly processes of the universe just to gratify our requests? So, in a wide variety of forms, the doubts and objections arise.

Any attempt to answer all of these would engage us in a discussion far too long for our present limits. Later we will make a partial answer in the general consideration of all the objections. It will be helpful at this point, however, to note that this form of thinking is itself not free from difficulties. For one thing, if God is unable to affect the course of events in the universe, then he himself has become bound by the creation he has brought into existence. More than once in the history of human thought this conclusion has been reached: God set the universe in motion, and has since retired to imperturbable and benign isolation, unconcerned for the fate of his handiwork. But this view itself is far too genteel an interpretation of matters. It at least gives God

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an initial freedom to decide when and where he will let go and retire. Strict scientific determinism could not allow him even that prerogative. Pressed to its logical conclusion, this whole point of view must lead to the elimination of God from the universe altogether. If he is not now needed to control and affect the order of the universe (and of our little personal lives in it), why suppose that he was ever needed? Why not drop the thought of God altogether?

That conclusion, however, plunges us into the whole problem of faith in God. To refrain from petition and intercession because we do not believe God can respond is to doubt fundamentally our whole conception of him. If we come to the point where we eliminate God from an active part in the universe, then our discussion of prayer becomes irrelevant, as indeed does any discussion of almost anything whatsoever. All would be determined by law and impersonal force. The foundation of all prayer, and indirectly of all intellectual and appreciative experience, is the affirmation of an order of creation in which personality is a still higher level of effectual power than any impersonal or material force.

2. *The Difficulty in God's Omniscience.* "Doesn't God know my needs and foresee all that is for my good, far better than I and long before I ask him?" This objection appears, in a sense, to be at the opposite pole to that which we have just been reviewing. In that, God is helpless before the deterministic laws of the universe. In this, God is all-wise, all-powerful; who are we to move him from his course? Such a view has the attrac-

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tion of seeming to exalt God to the highest conception we could possibly have of him.

But noble as it appears to be, upon further examination it too is beset by its own difficulties. On the part of God, it tends to bind him in a theological determinism, as complete and as devastating to any idea of personal communion with men as the material determinism ascribed to natural law. God could not change his purposes or the course of events he has preordained, in order to answer our prayers, without breaking down the whole structure of his omniscient power.

For our part, such a view leads also to unsatisfactory conclusions. On the one hand, it can easily lead us into a careless indifference in all aspects of our intercourse with God. "God will forgive me; that's his business," said Heine; and in the end, we paraphrase his words and say, "God will look after me without my asking; that's his business!" Quite clearly, such an attitude is far from the practice of that loving communion which we have been claiming as the heart of the life of prayer.

On the other hand, such a view fails to answer our anxieties about our life, which require not only the alleviation of our immediate needs but the indispensable accompaniment of such relief: the chance to pour out our fears, want, and worry to someone who will hear with a compassionate heart. The final degradation of charity comes when a man has to ask it from those whose only response is to give him the material things for which he must beg. Though we had no other cause or hope in offering our petitions to God, there remains the fundamental need, as John Calvin wrote, "assidu-

ously to supplicate Him, that our heart may be always inflamed with a serious and ardent desire of seeking, and worshipping Him.”¹

3. *The Difficulty of Our Human Folly.* “But will we not ask unwisely, foolishly, selfishly?” This difficulty, of course, is the corollary of the one we have just been considering. Against God’s all-knowing providence, who are we to decide what we want, or need, or should ask to receive? Is it not possible that much we would ask for would do us more harm than good? And if our prayers were answered, might not others suffer from the good we receive? Picnickers pray for a dry day—and farmers’ crops wither for lack of rain. A young man prays for promotion—and finds himself now in a circle where social obligations lead him into debt and threaten to wreck his home. A sick woman prays to be cured—then like the nine lepers in the Gospel immediately forgets God and rushes back into her old life of frivolity and selfishness. W. H. Auden has Herod protest against the “wild prayer of longing that rises, day in, day out, from all these households under my protection: ‘O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Eternity would bore us dreadfully. Leave Thy heavens and come down to our earth of water clocks and hedges. Become our uncle, look after Baby, amuse Grandfather, escort Madam to the opera, help Willy with his homework, introduce Muriel to a handsome naval officer. Be interesting and weak like us, and we will love you as we love ourselves.’”²

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The objection is persuasive. The privilege of intercession ought not to open for us the gates to all sorts of foolish or self-seeking requests. None of us can regard himself as wise enough, and selfless enough, always to pray rightly for himself or for others. Yet to refrain from asking of God because we are too weak and foolish brings us to the same denial of fellowship with him as does the idea that we ought not to pray because he is all-wise. Indeed, our folly and selfishness are likely to be the stronger in us because we never have brought our requests before him and seen what we desire, and what we are, under the light of his Presence. We seldom recognize how trivial, self-centered, or even evil our requests are until we have asked someone who loves us to grant them to us; then we are embarrassed and ashamed that we should so have asked.

Here, again, the same principle which we saw applying to our prayers of confession should guide us: by the pouring out of our desire before God, we come to see ourselves as we are, and to be cleansed and purified by his grace. "We know not what we should pray for as we ought," writes Paul, "but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us" (Romans 8:26)—as though to say that poor as our prayers are, God is able to take them up into his own concern for us and turn them to good account. Wisdom to pray aright comes more surely to those who dare to pray than to those who refuse because they cannot pray perfectly.

4. *The Difficulty of "Unanswered Prayer."* "But how does it happen that so often when we pray we do not

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receive what we ask for?" This question brings us back to the heart of the matter. Some people have prayed and have received what they asked for, and "exceeding abundantly above all that they asked or thought" (Ephesians 3:20). But others have asked, and asked—and their requests have not been granted. Aviators adrift on a raft in the Pacific pray, and at last are rescued; and they return to tell how God mercifully answered their petitions. But no one knows what other men have drifted on a raft under the pitiless sun, and prayed, and prayed, and no answering deliverance has come. The instances multiply: for every prayer granted, another seems to be denied. Where is there ground for any certainty that when we pray, God will answer our petitions?

Much depends, of course, upon what we mean by saying that prayer is "answered." A business man writes a letter to a manufacturer, ordering a piece of machinery. A reply acknowledges his order; soon after, the machine arrives. His letter is answered; he gets what he asked for. A father writes a letter to his son on the battlefield. After a while he receives a reply. His letter, too, is "answered." Nothing was requested; nothing was sent in return: in what sense is this an answer? In the sense that as each wrote to the other, he sent something of himself; and each implied, in the very act of writing, his confidence that the other would send back something of himself in return.

It is quite true that often our prayers are not answered in the sense of our getting the thing we ask for. It is even true that those who have practiced prayer

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long and devoutly have often felt not only that their requests were denied but that God withheld himself from them. But those who persevere in prayer and remain constant in faith bring back to us the reassurance that the answer is always certain to come: in his good time, and according to his infinite wisdom, God gives himself to us. "Three times I besought the Lord about this," wrote Paul of his unnamed affliction, "but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you'" (II Corinthians 12:8-9, RSV).

The difficulties we have named must be taken seriously. But it may be clear now that none of them has quite the absolute force that is sometimes attached to it. There are objections to the objections. Although various replies to the questions they raise can be made, the substance of them all is the fundamental conception of prayer which was stated at the beginning of this chapter: God is personal, seeking to bring us as persons into communion with himself. To that end, all the circumstances and elements of our existence can be used, if we are willing to regard them as means to his ends, not advantages or disadvantages for the pursuit of our own purposes in life. But the essential relation of Person to person requires a certain measure of free response to each other. Neither God, in his infinite way, nor ourselves, in our finite, creaturely way, could be fully persons unless there is place within our relations for these acts of asking and receiving.

Has personality, in this sense, any place and power in our universe? We are coming in our time to believe

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that it has. The studies of science, while they cannot, by definition, either prove or disprove those characteristics of being which constitute personality, at least are less disposed today to describe the universe as a kind of closed order in which the free force of personality can never operate. A more adequate view of the universe seems now to suggest that there are various orders of creations to be accounted for, and that personality very probably may be thought of as having higher significance and greater determinative power than any other order we know. Such a view would only repeat, in abstract terms, the living experience of meeting with God which brave men and women of all ages have claimed as their own. Dr. Johnson once remarked of freedom of the will, "All theory is against it; all experience for it."⁸ The same conclusion may be ours concerning prayer of asking and receiving: theory may be against it; but human experience surely is for it!

The Practice of Petition and Intercession

Let us turn now to the manner of our petitions and intercessions. As we have seen in other aspects of the practice of prayer, each of us must find his own way here. Certain broad lines of direction may be indicated:

First: We should enter upon this kind of prayer as an affirmation of our faith in God. Prayer, as we have said, is a whole life of communion. When we come to God to ask of him, we are affirming our faith that such communion is possible and that the fellowship it opens to

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us is our first and inclusive need. For this reason, our prayers of petition and intercession are not likely to go well for us when we neglect the offering of adoration, confession, and thanksgiving.

Jesus speaks more than once of the necessity of our having faith if our requests are to be granted. That faith, as has been suggested, reaches out to include our hunger for and our confidence in the love of God toward us. It is something more than a kind of concentrated autosuggestion by which we hope to compel events to turn according to our wish. It is also something far more than the working out of an automatic bargain with God, or a "technique"—a sort of spiritual jujitsu by which to tumble fortune to our feet. To ask for the things we need or desire, for ourselves or others, is to declare our faith that all these have their place and meaning within the purpose and providence of God. The practice of this kind of prayer, therefore, will become most real and helpful to us as we bring ourselves to it free of the mood of strain and anxiety, and collected into a frame of trust, hope, and readiness to commit ourselves and our requests fully to God.

Second: We should enter upon this kind of prayer with the intention that God's will, not our own, must be done. Only the endorsement of our asking with the words Jesus used in Gethsemane—"Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done"—can save our prayers from becoming self-centered, trivial, or even harmful to ourselves or others. But to pray in this way is not easy. As William Temple said, we are tempted to pray that

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God's will be done, but then to go on to tell God what his will should be.⁴ Our spontaneous petitions, of course, often will have a great deal of our own self-will in them. The "self," in this egocentric sense, does not die easily in us, and under the provocation of some crisis or a highly excited desire it irrupts into our prayers.

There is the more need, then, for us to undertake the discipline of the steady practice of praying for others, and for ourselves, in order to free ourselves from the stuff of self which gets mixed into our petitions. When we make such praying a daily and continuing practice, we can prepare ourselves for it by taking thought as to what we ought to ask and can ask that will be acceptable to God. The irresponsibility that characterizes our impulsive praying lies not so much in what we actually pray for as it does in our failure to think well before we ask.

There is great value in the practice of arranging the causes, concerns, and people for whom we are led to pray in a sequence which can be carried through the prayers of a week, so that each is given due thought and place in our praying. Baron von Hügel once wrote that spiritual matters should always be seen in their "second clearness" before they are acted upon.⁵ Such an orderly arrangement of our petitions and intercessions helps to bring that kind of clarification into our requests. It will not exclude, of course, those subjects of prayer which require immediate expression; but it does help us avoid "prayer by impulse," with all the aftermath this brings of frustration, unreality, and chagrin at our selfishness.

In this respect, the practice of prayer again becomes the life of prayer and reaches out beyond the times of

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our actual praying to include our practice of thinking reflectively about the objects of our prayer; and the daily manner of our living, in which our prayers are supplemented by our work and actions. To pray, "Thy will be done," is to commit ourselves totally to God. Of this we will say more when we consider the sense of vocation as the groundwork of prayer.

Third: We are to persevere in this practice of praying for ourselves and for others. Even the simplest of our requests may entail the changing of a great many very powerful factors before an answer can come. To pray for daily bread may seem to many of us superfluous, since we have it before us whenever we are hungry, and often when we are eating only for the pleasure of dining in company. We forget easily what stupendous forces of nature and what toil on the part of other people have gone into the provision of bread for our use. Only in time of famine or war are we able to appreciate the immensity of the request we repeat so glibly, "Give us this day our daily bread."

When we pray for the improvement of some condition in our personal life—health, the reorganization of emotional patterns, the conquest of moral temptations—we are up against deeply entrenched forces, persistent elements in nature, and in human nature, which do not give way at the first impulsive wish, however sincere our prayer is meant to be. Must not the same be said of our prayers for such great causes as world peace, human justice and well-being, the spread and purification of the church? Can we suppose the forces to be overcome here will yield to our passing requests, lightly

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touched on as they chance to come into our minds while we are praying? Paul may seem to be speaking in terms of superstition when he says, "We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:20. RSV). Anyone who has striven valiantly for the conquest of a stubborn condition in his own life, or in society, will be led by his praying to acknowledge the truth of these words. Our petitions and intercessions must have the mark of heroic perseverance if they are to be commensurate with the answers which our asking seeks. So, Jesus said, men "ought to pray always and not to faint" (Luke 18:1).

The practice of this perseverance can be carried on best when we discipline our praying under a pattern of daily intercession. The alternative would be to pray only "when we feel like it." But our feelings turn out to be very erratic and irresponsible, and since we are never sure that we feel sufficiently "like it" to go ahead with our prayer, the outcome almost certainly will be that we fail to pray altogether. Moreover, to put our practice of prayer at the mercy of our feelings is to mistake entirely the essential element in prayer, which lies not in how we *feel* but in what we *will*. We have touched on this principle before, and will be considering it further. It need only be said here that the faithful practice of supplication requires steadfast perseverance in praying, day in and day out, without too much deference being paid to the state of our feelings and inspirations.

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Fourth: We should be free to pray for concrete and particular things, limited in significance though these may appear to be. The quality of our asking does not depend upon any inherent merit of the thing in itself, but upon the motive we have for asking. Just as we are to give thanks to God for the particular blessings, joys, advantages, he grants us, because these have a sacramental significance—they are means of grace by which we are led on into the life of service and communion with him—so we are likewise to ask for particular things. As we grow in the life of the spirit, a great simplification of life begins to settle upon us. Many things we once would have prayed for, and would have regarded as needful to our spiritual growth, now seem quite unessential or even encumbering. The mother in André Gide's novel *The Counterfeiters* confides to her guest, "I have learned to ask less and less of life . . . and of myself, more and more." ⁶ The result of much prayer is for us to be brought to this simplification of our needs, and this offering back of ourselves to God. But we should caution ourselves against assuming a spiritual maturity here which we do not possess, and against denying ourselves—for the sake of achieving a certain quality of refinement in our praying—the same free, concrete, and immediate petitions which give richness and vitality to our prayers of thanksgiving.

It is not necessary, of course, for us to give God extensive information about our wants. To pray for health will not require me to present him with a diagnosis of my ailments. To pray for the relief of another person's sorrow does not involve a lengthy rehearsal of all the circumstances that make her affliction so grievous. In-

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tercessions for world peace, some ministerial prayers to the contrary, are not meant to be a news-analyst's report on international diplomatic crises. What we can seek to do is simply to hold ourselves and others and the concerns we bear up to God—"in the light," as certain of the saints would say; and to try to see these requests as fully within his compassionate love. When Jane Addams went to confront the aldermen of Chicago with the conditions of the area in which Hull House stood, she would take with her one of the mothers from the neighborhood to remind her why she had come to meet with these officials. Our prayers become an act of taking into the presence of God with us the persons, peoples, causes, concerns, for which we are to pray; and we bring them before him, pointing to them as we look at him, and wait for him to do with them and for them his "good pleasure."

Finally: We must be ready to pay the price which our asking entails. All forms of praying have their price. The emaciated appearance of the traditional saint, however exaggerated and unappealing to our eye, bears witness to something truer and more significant than simply an arbitrary practice of self-denial. The work of prayer engages us, as has been said, in a heroic encounter with imponderable forces. Especially is this true in the kind of giving of ourselves for the sake of others which intercessory prayer takes for granted. If two individuals are closely associated, as partners in business, roommates in college, or crew-members in a factory, each makes certain intangible demands upon the personal resources of the other. When both are strong per-

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sonalities, the association may be mutually enriching. But if one is morally loose, emotionally unstable, lacking in inner health and integrity, he will take his toll of the health, vitality, and moral energies of his companion. This is none the less true when their relations are kept at the point of routine co-operation, or of casual acquaintanceship.

The same principle holds, in a deeper sense, with respect to intercessory prayer. We offer ourselves in it for a peculiarly sensitive relationship with others. If our prayer is to have meaning and be effectual, we will have to take upon ourselves some of the cost exacted as the price for the change which we seek to have brought about in the person or the situation. A Christian psychologist has acknowledged this truth when he says that in order to treat his patient he must himself "go down into hell" with him, before he can help him back to mental health.

The cost of prayer for others takes for its symbol the cross of Jesus Christ. In traditional liturgies, the death of Jesus on the cross is connected with his intercessions for us at the right hand of God. A Christian does not think of his own sacrifices as being the equivalent of the sacrifice Jesus makes of himself in his death; but he does take for himself Paul's prayer that he may "know the fellowship of his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10) and in some way participate in the cost by which the world—and mankind, and he himself—is brought back into communion with God.

This is not at all to say that in order to offer our petitions and intercessions we must inflict sufferings upon ourselves, or even go about in a tragic cast of mind. We

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are to do all we do in joy, and as Jesus taught, to keep to ourselves whatever cost we are paying for our prayers. But we will be prepared to accept as the indispensable counterpart of our praying the cost in spiritual—and physical—energies, the burden of concern, the consciousness of the pain, struggle, and sacrifice required, if our prayers are to be fulfilled. Rainer Rilke wrote to a young friend, “There is scarcely anything more difficult than to love one another. That is work, day labour, Frederick, day labour.”⁷ To love others by praying for them is also “day labour,” and lifelong labor, whose cost we must accept as the accompaniment of our prayers.

Quite possibly all we have been trying to say in this chapter will fall short of satisfying our questions about asking and receiving in prayer, or of describing fully how such prayer is to be carried on. In no aspect of prayer is it more true that only by engaging in the practice can we come to know its validity and power. When we are ready to pray for ourselves and for others, we soon discover the truth of Evelyn Underhill’s remark that “intercessory prayer is as necessary as passing the salt.”⁸ And we soon discover, as well, that our asking of God is meant for something more than simply meeting our needs and relieving our sufferings; it is meant first of all to bring us into loving and trusting fellowship with himself. Therefore, we are to “be anxious for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let our requests be made known unto God” (Philippians 4:6).

The Patterns of Praying

IN THE FOREGOING CHAPTERS, prayer has been described as personal communion between God and ourselves. Because that communion is a relationship between persons and Person, it takes a variety of forms which arise out of the needs and the purposes expressed regarding all our personal intercourse with others. These we have considered as prayer of adoration, of confession, of thanksgiving, and of petition.

As we have been describing the content of prayer, under these aspects, some suggestions have been made for the manner in which each mode of prayer can be practiced. In the chapters that follow, these practical suggestions will be gathered up for more detailed consideration, and augmented by other principles and procedures which can contribute some answer to the recurring question, "How shall I try to pray?"

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In approaching these practical instructions, we must remind ourselves again that prayer can never be reduced to a set of rules, can never be organized into a system or technique capable of bringing about assured results. Eric Gill, the English sculptor, wrote a friend, "Just as you cannot certainly paint a good picture by going to an art school and learning a 'method,' but must fall in love with God first and last . . . so you cannot certainly walk with God by following a 'method' but must wait upon him as upon a lover—singing beneath his window—waiting for him in the snow!"¹

Any attempt to describe a pattern of praying will necessarily fall short of being equally helpful for every person. Differences in our innate capacities, our character training, our development of sensitivities, may affect in some measure the way in which we find prayer most effective. In the patterns of prayer described by the masters of devotional discipline, such as Ignatius Loyola or Francis de Sales, spiritual exercises have been presented that employ profound psychological and religious insights, and that have proved effective in nurturing and re-creating the devotional life of great numbers of men and women. Yet not everyone will find them suitable to his especial needs and capacities; and a person not raised within the framework of Catholic religious teaching may find some aspects of these treatises unavailable for his own use. On the other hand, Christians might find much to enrich and strengthen their practice of prayer in the teachings of Moslem mystics, or the religious disciplines of Yoga.

Clearly, a book such as this cannot hope to describe

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all the possible ways of prayer that are available to the individual. To do so might be to lead us into tentative experimenting with every possible method, while we refrain from setting ourselves purposefully to the work of making one sound course our own. What we will try to do in this and succeeding chapters is to describe certain elemental principles and practices that have stood the test of experience for a great number of men and women, in all sorts of circumstances and of all degrees of capacity. In doing so, we will continually keep in mind that each individual must discover his own best way to prayer, as the spirit of God leads him on.

Yet it must be said, frankly, that the point of view from which these chapters are written is that prayer makes serious demands upon those who attempt it, as the mastery of an art makes its radical demands upon the artist. Good intentions and a first vivid eagerness in prayer can no more serve for the long pull than they can in any other endeavor in which perseverance, intelligent direction of action, and growth into a larger power and richness of meaning are inextricably related. Especially, we must warn ourselves against accepting too quickly what we regard as the limitations of our abilities or the barriers of circumstance.

The celebrated eighteenth-century actor, David Garrick, once replied to a compliment paid his genius, "I do not confide myself, not I, in that inspiration for which idle mediocrity waits." The life of prayer that is to develop spiritual "staying-power," that is to bear fruit in effective Christian living as it deepens our sense of the presence of God, will be no less rigorous in its de-

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mands. If such an approach to the life of prayer seems, at the outset, to make the venture too stern for those of us who feel ourselves to be only ordinary individuals, let us again take heart by setting the goal and the reward constantly before us, and by remembering that we do not make this journey alone but are drawn on at every step by the grace of God, who seeks us for himself.

When we undertake to discipline ourselves in the practice of prayer, we must expect at first that the means and methods we adopt will cause us to feel self-conscious. This sense of artificiality, arising from the fact that our attention centers more upon *how* we are doing than upon what we are doing, attaches itself to all our efforts at learning new patterns of acting. Embarrassed or discouraged by the apparent unreality of our endeavors, we are often tempted to sink back to the old routines and habits which, for all their awkwardness or ineffectiveness, seem to permit us a little freedom. But, as in art, so in prayer, true freedom of action and genuine feelings of competence and effectiveness await us, not this side, but the other side, of what may seem at times to be the stony plateau of discipline. "Spontaneous prayer," writes Father George Florovsky, "comes only after training."²

Time and Place for Daily Prayer

The first step in training ourselves in the life of prayer will be the setting apart of a regular time and place for daily prayer. The indispensable minimum of

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time, in the judgment of many, will be half an hour. When a continuous period of thirty minutes is not possible, two shorter periods should be attempted, preferably with one at the beginning and one at the end of the day.

This division of the time, however, should be accepted only after serious examination of circumstances. The act of settling ourselves into the attitude of living prayer requires a sustained interval, if the superficial distractions and layers of self-preoccupation are to be stripped away and the presence of God allowed to move into our consciousness. Short intervals or snatches of a few moments' duration obstruct the full rhythm of this work.

By rising half an hour earlier, by leaving home in time to stop in the church on our way to work, by getting to the office thirty minutes before the business day begins, or by regularly taking for prayer the first half hour after the children and the members of the household have left for school and for the day's work, we can often find the time that at first thought seemed denied us. Of course, these adjustments in our daily schedule may call for a reordering of the whole scheme of our living. The practice of prayer is not to be achieved without a readiness to undertake revisions, often inconvenient and far-reaching, in our accustomed routine.

There is convincing evidence, also, for arranging this half hour of prayer as early in the day as possible. Again, allowances will need to be made for the rigidity of other claims upon our time, as well as for those physical and psychological traits that cause some of us to

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spring from our sleep full of alert vitality, while others come awake slowly as the day goes on.

Postponement of the time of prayer until the end of the day, however, should be allowed only after careful examination of our reasons for doing so. Prayer is not to be regarded as a pleasant spiritual doze before the fire of God's presence, and therefore most congenial to us at the day's twilight. The concentrated effort required in fruitful praying will call for the full resource of our energies. We cannot hope to enter upon an effectual life of prayer if we give to our praying only the remnants of mental and bodily powers, after we have spent ourselves in satisfying our own needs and purposes through the day. Even those temperamental traits that affect our alertness at the beginning of the day seldom have the fixity we allow them. Mind and body can be retrained to different patterns of response. The more abundant our vitality at the day's beginning, the more reason to discipline it to the service of prayer, before the other demands to be made upon it by our duties and activities can make their claim.

The element of regularity in the time set for prayer adds greatly to its fruition. We have had occasion to point out earlier that the temptation to pray only when we feel inclined to prayer means that we abandon the practice of prayer to our inconstant whims and moods. Unable to pray today because we are tired, emotionally disturbed, or exhausted, or because we are excited by some new opportunity opening to us, we postpone our prayer until tomorrow. But tomorrow we are unable to decide whether we are any more ready to pray than

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we were today; and the day following we conclude that since we never can be sure at any time whether we really are in the mood to pray, we had better stop worrying about it and give up the effort altogether.

The source of this temptation, as has been said, lies in the mistaken idea that prayer depends upon the way we *feel* while we are praying. Our escape from this illusion will be found in seeing that the essence of our praying lies in the act of our *will*. Not how we feel, but what we set ourselves to *do*: to offer our praise to God; to seek his mercy; to commit to him our desires and necessities; in short, to offer *ourselves* to him—this is the true test of prayer's reality.

For this kind of self-offering, the will must be strengthened in power, sharpened in its aim; and unfaltering regularity of practice alone will serve to develop that strength. Although regularity of practice can sink into mechanical habit, that danger of sterility in regular prayer is not nearly so great as the risk we take when we impose upon ourselves the necessity of deciding every day when, where, and whether we are going to pray at all.

The reasons for setting a regular time for prayer are akin to those that favor a settled place to which we retire daily. The ideal will be a small room, isolated from possible disturbances and furnished in such a way as to aid but not encumber our devotions. Many of us, however, will have to find a place for prayer in surroundings far from ideal. Those living in crowded homes may find it necessary, again, to rise before other members of the family, or, as has been suggested, to

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arrange one's schedule of going to work so that one can stop at an open church, or to arrive early at the office or the schoolroom, in order to have privacy there before others come for the day. Some have learned to keep their time of prayer in the midst of the bustling anonymity of a commuters' train. Madam Schumann-Heink once told how, in the earlier years of her career, she learned the score of operas by propping the music before her in the kitchen while she held a baby in one arm and stirred a cake with the other. Prayer, at least at certain levels, is still possible in the midst of such circumstances. However, these "makeshifts" should not be accepted without serious study of our present surroundings, and of the possibilities that would open to us through some revision in our scheme of living.

The return, day by day, to the same place for prayer brings to our aid the clustering associations that this one room begins to acquire; it frees us from the distractions that arise from having to settle ourselves anew in unfamiliar surroundings. As we have means and opportunity, we can add to this room of prayer a picture, a woodcut, a small piece of statuary, or the gleanings of rock, cones, and autumn leaves taken in our walks through the woods. A chair that shapes itself to our physical repose, while keeping us upright and awake for prayer, can be a genuine aid to devotional practice. Personal inclination will have much to do with the kind of surroundings we provide for ourselves. The essential consideration is that the regular use of the same place can greatly strengthen us in the persistence of our prayer, while the arrangement of simple and suit-

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able surroundings can free us from some of the ordinary sources of distraction and suggest to us the purpose of our coming to this place.

The Practices of Spoken and Silent Prayer

How can this period we have set apart for daily praying be used most helpfully? Although any scheme for its use should not be adhered to so rigidly that we are hindered rather than helped in our communion with God, some orderly arrangement of the time, some disciplined practices, will set us free from the frustration that comes from not being sure just what we should be doing.

A simple procedure for the use of a half-hour period may well include at least these aspects of devotional practice: (1) devotional reading, including the devotional reading of the Bible; (2) the offering of vocal prayers, both in fixed and in spontaneous form; (3) silent prayer—waiting in open awareness for God to reach us. The subject of devotional reading will be considered in Chapter 10. Here we will be concerned with the practice of vocal and silent prayer.

1. *Vocal Prayer.* In nearly all of our conscious mental activity we resort to some measure of verbalizing as a means of giving shape to our thinking. Often we do not feel that we have clearly formed our ideas until we are able to express them in spoken language; and we find that “talking it out”—even to ourselves—may be one way of arriving at this clarity of thought. Woodrow Wilson

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was taught by his father never to assume that he had made an idea his own until he could express it clearly to other people. To this might be added the suggestion that the attempt to express an idea clearly to others is one means of making the idea our own. In those fields of mental activity in which an individual engages constantly, he learns in time to eliminate these verbal accompaniments to his thinking and to deal directly with ideas, as with flashes of insight. But mental proficiency of this kind comes only after long, exacting discipline.

The bearing of this truth about our mental life upon the practice of prayer is clear. As we try to present our praise and petitions to God in spoken language, we clarify our own feelings and desires toward him; we imprint them more strongly with the mark of earnestness. If the words spoken seem sometimes to fall upon empty air—as surely they do now and then for all who pray—still the simple and fervent utterance of our prayer can help us to a stronger sense of the reality of this intercourse with God in which we are engaged.

The practice of vocal prayer can be strengthened, first, by the use of great prayers which have come to us out of the centuries of Christian worship. Collections of prayers, such as Fox's *A Chain of Prayers Across the Ages*, Suter's *The Book of English Collects*, or Morgan P. Noyes's *Prayers for Services*, provide a rich variety of noble prayers for every need and occasion. *The Student Prayerbook*, edited by a committee under John Oliver Nelson, combines the rich expression of ancient prayers and liturgies with the clean, spare simplicities

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of prayers in modern speech, written out of our own needs and devotion. When we read aloud these prayers, bearing as they do the bright luster from generations of ardent use, and when we offer them to God as our own deep utterance, we will find ourselves bringing to our own attempts at vocal prayer the ring of certitude and the lifting power of strong, deeply felt emotion.

In the course of our daily prayer, then, we can well familiarize ourselves with some well-planned collection of prayers, and can pause before we move into the period of vocal prayer to choose those particular prayers that best speak for us at this moment. The sequence of collects for the Christian year, as given, for example, in the *Book of Common Prayer*, can serve to give an orderly plan to our praying and free us from the necessity of always making a fresh choice every day. Those who arrange their prayers on a weekly plan, with each day of the week given to special prayers for one particular theme, will find this sequence aiding them in selecting the prayers to be used from day to day.

The felicity of oral prayer can be encouraged, also, through our devotional reading, and especially the reading of the Bible. William Law's advice has much to commend it: "When at any time, either in reading the Scripture or any book of piety, you meet with a passage that more than ordinarily affects your mind, and seems, as it were, to give your heart a new motion towards God, you should try to turn it into the form of a petition, and then give it a place in your prayers. By this means you will be often improving your prayers and storing yourself with proper forms of making the desires

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of your heart known unto God.”³ A close study of the great prayers of Christian tradition will show that they have been composed very much after this principle. The themes and the phrases of the Bible, especially of the Psalms, have been woven into the fabric of the prayers, so that what is declared to us in this Holy Word is answered by the return of these thoughts and expressions in prayer.

Vocal prayer will come to us in greater freedom and convincingness when we engage in it with others. Many people of an earlier generation acquired articulateness in prayer through their experiences in corporate worship. “Sentence prayers” at the young people’s meeting, “seasons of prayer” at the Wednesday evening prayer meeting, served as simple but effective schools for praying aloud. Though the prayers were sometimes stereotyped, and sometimes the call to pray inspired more volubility than fervency, nevertheless those present were under both the incitement and the discipline of the company, who imposed a higher expectation for the sincerity and the appropriateness of the prayers offered than the individual could have set for himself. Our own aptness in vocal prayer will benefit from this same inspiration and discipline as we avail ourselves of the opportunity to join in oral prayer in the company of others met together for the praise and supplication of God. As we shall see, one of the purposes of the face-to-face fellowship described in Chapter 11 is to provide a “school of vocal prayer” for its members. Our participation as listeners in the corporate prayer offered in the public worship of the church also can enhance our own efforts to pray aloud.

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Yet we need not wait upon aptness or eloquence before we begin the practice of vocal prayer. We can express our adoration, make our confession, raise our thanks, and lay our supplications before God in whatever language we can command. Fixed prayers, however enriching, should not occupy all of our time in this aspect of our praying. We can put in simple order the various points of prayer that arise as important for the day. When we have arranged and clarified these, we can offer them to God, in the assurance that he does not wait upon sublimity of utterance before he hears and responds.

2. *Silent Prayer.* In the half hour of devotion, we not only seek to speak to God, but we invite his communion with us. Any account we can give of his communication must employ some measure of figurative language. We can say that he “speaks” to us, although only a few, sentient persons have had the experience of feeling that God spoke to them in audible, human utterance. We can say that his spirit “inspires” us, that we feel the “motion of his presence” in us or about us, or that we are illuminated by the “inner Light.”

But the reality of God’s communion with us does not depend upon our power to identify its characteristics. The assurance of all who have “waited upon the Lord” confirms us in believing that if we give ourselves to him, he will respond to our need and our hope for his living presence in a way that carries its own authority.

The fullest entrance into this prayer of silent waiting upon God has been described in the classical accounts

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of prayer as the climax of a long journey, a mounting at last to the highest rung of the "spiritual ladder." There the soul, at last free from all encumbrances of self, is caught up into union with God himself, unspeakably full of joy and peace and love. That soaring peak of communion does not come to all; for some, it may never be reached within the span of our earthly life.

But again, we need not wait at the threshold of silent prayer because we feel unprepared to enter its highest states. The beginner in prayer can learn, at the very outset, to withdraw himself from the turbulence of daily life, to put aside the distractions that so easily overrun his mind, and to "center down" and wait simply upon the presence of God. Remembering always that all of our prayer, vocal or silent, comes to us, not by our own striving, but as the gift of God's gracious love for us, it is still possible to make concrete suggestions for putting ourselves into readiness to accept whatever he seeks to give:

a. *The body should be brought into a state of quiet.* When we pray, we pray with our whole selves. We cannot enter into quiet, expectant waiting in the presence of God while our muscles are tense and our nerves tingle with a multitude of reactions set off by our own activities or the stimuli that bombard us from without. Trying to do so would be as frustrating as trying to speak gently while gesturing violently with a clenched fist! The first step toward gathering ourselves to an inward quiet will be the releasing of the body from these muscular and organic tensions which so closely affect our mental and emotional states.

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The steps for acquiring this condition of release are simple. Since perception of muscular tension comes more easily than does awareness of relaxation, we learn to relax by contrast—first tensing muscles as much as we can, then “letting go” as far as we can. At each repetition, we try to “go beyond” the point of relaxation previously reached. Beginning with the large active tensors of limbs, hands, chest, we proceed to the muscles that control the neck, face, eyes—tensing and stiffening, then relaxing as far as we can.

The condition we seek to bring about is one of poise and ease, free from any conscious symptom of tension and characterized by a feeling of unlocalized, indistinguishable well-being, interior warmth and repose. This state is not to be confused with drowsiness. In contrast, it should lead to a degree of awakened clarity and freedom of response seldom realized when we are working under great nervous and muscular tension. When the body—Saint Francis’ “Brother Ass”—has been put at ease, we are released into a new receptiveness toward those intimations of the presence of God which our bodily turmoil has prevented us from recognizing.

b. *Attention should be concentrated.* After the body has been brought into a state of quiet, our mental powers must be clarified and brought into a state of singleness of attention. This step has both a negative and a positive phase. On the one hand, we must seek to bring control over our impulses, distractions, and mental confusions. “Do not pay too much attention to the wandering, lunatic mind!” wrote Edward Carpenter.⁴ How are we to discipline these clamoring notions and vagrant

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impulses that race boisterously through the corridors of our mind, or whisper shockingly from secretive corners?

The first step in gaining control over these irruptions, as we have had reason to see in earlier chapters, lies in the recognition of their deep rootage in our own sin. If we give license to our vagrant fancies during most of our waking hours, we can hardly expect them to retire discreetly when the time comes for us to enter into silence before the presence of God. We will find ourselves driven back to God again and again, to seek his help that we might be released from these self-centered, self-nurtured preoccupations, which we have allowed often to gain control over us.

But we cannot and need not wait until we are entirely free from all these intrusions before we seek God in quietness of mind. The discipline of the body to the practice of repose will have an effect in stilling our minds and our feelings. We can gain in power, also, to meet distractions at the threshold of our attention and to turn them aside quietly and simply. Claims upon our attention which cannot be lightly dismissed can be recognized and then "pigeonholed," to be dealt with when the period of prayer is over. In some instances a serious claim will need to be dealt with before we can proceed in prayer, as Jesus taught when he bids us first be reconciled with those estranged from us, before we bring our gifts to the altar (Matthew 5:23-24).

Other distractions cannot be dismissed easily, nor be set right by our own effort. A constantly pressing fear, the reverberations of old angers or old anxieties, even

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some joyful, eager expectation, will not always yield to our control and allow themselves to be put aside. When that happens, these intrusions can be taken up into our prayer. We lay them fully before God, ask his help in meeting and fulfilling their claim upon us, and then commit them and ourselves, even our distractedness, into his loving power.

Many of the sources of distraction can be brought under control by bringing a settled order into the whole scheme of our living. One of the secrets of the great administrative power of Gladstone, the British statesman, was said to be his ability never to take his problems to bed with him. We can hardly expect to practice prayer with a quiet mind if during most of our waking hours we wage an exhausting struggle against the chaos of our daily living. When some wise order has been brought into the day and the week, we will then be able to refer at least some of the counterattractions that disturb us to their proper time for attention. They need no longer be free to irrupt unpredictably upon us when we are seeking to wait quietly before God.

The management of distractions arising from external causes can take a similar course. They need not be resisted, but can simply be recognized, accepted, and dismissed. When external disturbances unsettle us too much, we ought to inquire what there is in ourselves that causes us to respond to these annoyances so strongly. Other people seem oblivious to the neighboring radio, the banging door, the boisterous conversation. Why are we so perturbed? On inquiry, we will often find that at the root of our resistance lies some

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fragment of old experience, cankered into resentment against anything or anyone who prevents us from having our own way—in this instance, our serene silence for prayer. Not the distraction of our prayer, but the offense to ourselves, is the real cause of our irritation.

The real task before us then becomes not the conquest of noise—though this has its place—but the eradication of that sensitivity which we have allowed to become the condition of our praying. When we can cease regarding these interruptions as personal offenses and can accept them as objective circumstances having no bearing upon our practice of prayer, we will often find that they vanish from the centers of our attention like vapor disappearing into inconsequential air.

And when disturbances cannot be put aside, they can always be used as means for turning our thought back to God. "The apparently most useless distractions," wrote Rainer Rilke of a poet's struggle to concentrate upon his writing, "can be a pretext for inwardly collecting oneself."⁵ The banging of the garbage collector recalls us to the truth that whosoever would be great must be servant of all; the rattling window can remind us that "the winds of God are always blowing, but we must hoist the sail"; the crying infant, bitter over his discovery of the world's indifference, can cry us awake to tenderness toward all suffering innocence, and call out our prayer that we may become as little children in order to learn to pray to our Father.

Above all, we can keep steadily in mind that our desire to be free from annoyance should arise from a genuine love and longing for God, not from any notion we

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have of achieving perfection in prayer. That ideal of perfection can be the most refined, and the most subtle, of all forms of self-centeredness. We would like, as Fénelon says, "because of love of self to have the pleasure of seeing ourselves perfect. . . . We are impatient, haughty and in an ill-humor against ourselves and others." ⁶ Our goal—and our work—is humbly to accept these difficulties that we meet when coming into attentive silence, as we must accept all our bodily, mental, and emotional limitations. We turn from them to God, asking his help and waiting to receive just that particular grace he wills for us at this time. In this work of learning to wait patiently for the Lord, it can be said that there are no heroes of attainment, but only of self-renunciation.

But conquest over distraction comes most effectively when it is won, not simply by this daily skirmish with interruptions, but through "the expulsive power of a new affection," to adopt Henry Drummond's famous phrase. Disregarding the distractions that beckon and tug at our sleeves, we walk eagerly into the silence where our spirit can wait for His Spirit, who has already been drawing us to himself. On him we set our gaze, and in the admonition of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, we lift our "hearts to God with a meek longing love," and a "naked intent unto God alone." ⁷

It will be clear, then, that prayer of silent awareness lays upon us the discipline of learning to think on God. When we are to be honored by a visit of some distinguished person, we anticipate his coming by trying to learn all we can about him. We read the books he has

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written, or those that have been written about his life and work. We gaze at his picture and listen eagerly to accounts given by those who have seen and known him personally. When, at last, he steps down the stairway at the landing strip, and long before we can formally introduce ourselves and take his hand, we recognize him as we would someone familiar to us by long acquaintance.

Is not our failure to be conscious of the presence of God in the silence due largely to the fact that we have given so little thought to him before we sought him there? Only when we turn away from questioning the manner of our praying to thinking on him to whom we pray will we find our distractions dispelled and the living presence of God becoming the center of all our prayer.

In this turning of our whole being toward God, we may come at last to the point where nothing more than the single, simple thought of him will serve to bring us at once into quiet open waiting for his loving outreach. Before we have arrived at this state of simple prayer, however, we may find help in the use of more tangible aids to concentration. The reading of devotional literature and of the Bible, in the first phase of our half hour, can serve to quiet our souls and set our attention in the direction of God. Singing a strong, familiar hymn or the offering of vocal prayer can further this centering of mood and attention. Many find great help in repeating a phrase of Scripture—"O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me!" "O rest in the Lord!" "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised!" "Our Father—Hal-

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lowed be Thy Name," or others that have been stored in the mind through the daily reading of the Bible, and that now and again emerge to express our longing desire and love for God.

As the silence penetrates more deeply into our being, the need for these aids will fall away, and we find ourselves going on—being drawn on—without dependence upon them. An actor employs the artifices of the stage—properties, costume, scene, dramatic techniques—to arouse and to frame his performance. But he depends upon these appurtenances only until he is himself caught up into the character and the action he is portraying, and becoming one with these, is fully released into his art. So in prayer, we make such use as we can, or must, of aids to our devotion, until we come awake to the presence of God and are set free into that loving communion he seeks to bring us to enter.

Praying Through the Day

We have been concerned in this chapter principally with two aspects of the pattern of devotion that can fill our half hour of daily prayer. Our consideration of this pattern in detail should not lead us to suppose that the remainder of the day is to be lived without prayer. We shall be concerned in the next chapter with the way in which the practice of prayer calls for a discipline of the whole range of our living, if we are not to divide our life dangerously between prayer and the multitude of activities that are not precisely acts of prayer.

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It remains in this chapter to take note of other specific occasions of prayer that have a place in our daily life. Although the half hour of devotion can be regarded as the indispensable minimum foundation for a life of prayer, other opportunities for praying arise in the course of the day. The cultivation of the habit of turning these to prayerful use will be a necessary part of our fullest life of prayer.

The first of these occasions will be found in the opportunity to give thanks when we sit down at mealtime. There is a particular significance in giving thanks when we eat. This physical nourishment symbolizes our need of the providence of God in every aspect of our being, and his loving-kindness in creating and preserving us. Although we will give thanks for all good things, food and drink become especially sacramental to us, as our celebration of the Lord's Supper beautifully teaches us.

Many families scatter so widely through the day that the practice of grace at family meals has become less common than for our grandparents. Yet, individually, members of a family can offer thanks where they are; and as they sit down to eat, they can remember one another in a moment's quiet lifting of the mind to God. The offering of prayer in a crowded lunchroom during the noon-hour rush does not come easily. It ought to be done without display or embarrassment, either to the one praying or those who crowd at his elbows. But a pause, and the inward turning to God, is quite possible and can serve.

Another occasion for brief prayer will come at the end of the day. If the half hour of prayer is kept early

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in the day, no extended order of prayer need be attempted now. Thanks for the day's gifts, including its struggles and vexations; confession of the sins we recognize, and asking for mercy on those we do not see; the commitment of ourselves, our loved ones, and all the causes and concerns we hold, into the loving hands of God — these brief motions of our hearts can bring us into his healing presence and lead us to our rest in peace. Remembering how the interior mind goes on with its life even while the conscious mind lies wrapt in sleep, we may well pray in the words of Bishop Ken's hymn:

*The faster sleep the sense doth bind
The more unfettered is the mind;
O may my soul from matter free,
Thy loveliness unclouded see!*⁸

In addition to these daily occasions for praying, we can learn to use all the varied events and circumstances of the day as opportunities to offer prayer. Before we lift the telephone for a call, as we enter a doorway on matters of business or of social conversation, or in the midst of tense and trying situations, we can send up the "shaft of lovely longing" to God, that his will be done. In this practice of prayer, our work, our life, and our prayer become merged, until we cannot easily say whether we busily pray or are prayerfully busy. Prayer becomes truly both an intimate communion with God at a particular time and place, and a constant sense of our living, working, speaking, in his all-pervading presence.

The Ingathering Action of Prayer

UNDERGIRDING THE PATTERN of prayer described in the preceding chapter moves a rhythm of outgoing expression and ingathering silence. In vocal prayer we reach up toward God, striving with all the strength of mind and soul and heart we can command to offer him our praise, confession, and supplication. In silent prayer we gather ourselves inwardly, turning from distractions, from desires and activities that claim us, and by a stilling of the reverberations touched off by our busyness, seek to place ourselves in a state of open receptiveness where God can reach us. Although these two forms of prayer have been described as following each other, experience in praying soon teaches us that they complement and sustain each other. The more we offer our spoken prayers to God, the deeper grows the silence within us. The further we withdraw into that quiet

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chamber of expectant waiting, the truer, stronger, becomes our uttered prayer.

When we move into the larger sphere of daily living where prayer joins with every aspect of our thought, interest, and activity, we shall discover this same fundamental rhythm moving through the pattern of all that we do. We have had occasion to point out frequently that the practice of prayer cannot be fully entered upon without becoming a life of prayer. Not simply the definite times and acts of praying, but the penetration of all our life with the attitude of prayerfulness, the permeation of all we do, think, say, or desire with a longing for communion with God, and the bending of all our life to this one end—this is what the rediscovery of prayer in its fullness implies.

This fully lived life of prayer will have its movement of outgoing expression and ingathering retirement. The alternate engagement of the self in external activity and interior retreat, in purposeful striving and trustful waiting upon the Spirit working within us, becomes both the expression and the requirement for a life given to the practice of the presence of God, and the doing of his will. The principle involved in this rhythmic alternation has been called by Arnold Toynbee the principle of "Withdrawal and Return." The withdrawal, he writes, "makes possible for the personality to realize powers within himself which might have remained dormant if he had not been released for the time being from his social toils and trammels." And the purpose of this withdrawal is found in "the return of the transfigured per-

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sonality into the social milieu out of which he originally had come.”¹

In our culture this principle of withdrawal and return, as the condition of creative living and work, has often been neglected. Our ideal has been that of strenuous efficiency, with every minute crammed with maximum activity. Time for reflection, for inward recuperation, for that renewal Walt Whitman called “inviting our souls,” has been regarded as naïve, if not irresponsible. Even our vacations become a change in scene and in type of activity, not a change in the pace and the centers of our attention; and we return to our work having substituted one state of exhaustion for another.

Yet it has long been known that any real advance we might make in the solution of our problems, in the discovery of new patterns for living, in the enrichment of our insights, must come through that slow and seemingly passive incubation within our being, which is possible only when we retire from busyness and give the deeper powers of the self an opportunity to grow and bear fruit. “All creative thinkers are dreamers,” declares Rosamond Harding in her remarkable study of the creative activity of artists, musicians, poets, and scientists.² That conclusion holds no less for those who have lived a life of creative prayer.

It applies with especial force to all who do not claim to have the unique endowments of genius. We are creatures of limited capacities: very well, then, we have so much greater need for conserving and developing the powers which we do possess. We are responsible for taking care that we do not use them up in trivial pur-

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poses that are constantly before us, and for seeing that we do not exhaust them by spending them prodigally on every activity that invites our attention. "Merely from talking with Albert yesterday about this projected book," wrote André Gide in his journal, "my will to see it through was weakened."⁸ How many of our good intentions and high purposes have run out to sink in the desert sands because of our lack of inward retirement to the living centers of renewal, where we might have found strength and resource to carry through the action we proposed for ourselves!

We will now look, in some detail, at both phases of this rhythm of "withdrawal and return," to discover how we can give ourselves both to the outgoing and to the ingathering aspects of its movement, and how these may be brought into a wise and fruitful balance in the basic order for the life of prayer.

The Discipline and Disposal of Our Days

Let us turn first to the practice of interior retirement. All that has been said about the pattern of praying, in its specific form, may be considered a part of this movement. Entering our closet and shutting the door on the clamor and preoccupations of our daily existence, we pray to our Father in secret, and in secret he hears and responds (Matthew 6:6). But when we rise from our knees, our prayers spoken and silent being ended, and go out from that inner chamber, we still are drawn by the desire to continue the communion we have had with him in this solitude. We yearn to be sure

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that the duties and obligations that now rightfully claim us need not cut us off from his presence or cause him to take his Holy Spirit from us. Had we the power to realize our deepest desire in this matter, we would somehow contrive to remain in the undiminished light of his love, while giving ourselves at the same time with clearest wisdom and most apt efficiency to the tasks and responsibilities that wait for our hands.

Some few rare souls seem to have reached that state of interior communion in the midst of exterior activity. But most of us have to acknowledge that the ideal far exceeds any realization of it in our own experience. The simplicity of Brother Lawrence's "practice of the presence of God" inspires in us mingled feelings of aspiration and despair. "In the noise and clatter of my kitchen," his biographer reports him as saying, "while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament."⁴ Can we ever come to the point where we can say as much for our communion with God?

Yet our case may not be as hopeless as we assume. The practice of the presence of God in the midst of his work in the kitchen did not come to Brother Lawrence as a gift entirely without cost. Out of a long discipline of himself, and a complete surrender of himself to the love and will of God, he could say that "in order to form a habit of conversing with God continually, we must at first apply to him with some diligence."⁵ Our course lies neither in longing for the ideal nor lamenting our failure to realize it, but in accepting for ourselves the fact

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that growth in the practice of God's continuing presence often comes slowly, and only as we apply ourselves to the discipline of life which can make that abiding presence possible.

What will such a discipline require of us? First, the ordering of our daily schedule so that we can have the largest opportunity for the practice of interior collectedness while engaged in our needful activities. We have seen that the setting aside of a half hour for daily prayer often involves us in the examination and reorganization of our scheme for the use of the entire day. But the attempt to plan the day in a way that leaves time for prayer soon shows itself to involve more than the shifting of a time chart. At best, we have too little time for all that we would like to do, that is worthy of our doing, or that we ought to do. Out of all the possible uses for our time, choices must be made, priorities established, purposes given precedence.

The working out of this problem will require creative insight and the exercise of resolution for each individual in the light of his own particular situation. He will be helped in his attempt to solve it, however, by keeping constantly in mind the goal sought: not a mechanical time-schedule for its own sake, but the larger freedom for communion with God which the orderly management of his responsibilities and activities makes possible. Fénelon advised the Duc de Chevreuse to sort out the day's activities, discarding the inconsequential and keeping to the important and necessary, in order that he might "surround the day with an air of circumambient leisure."⁶ The use we will make of our days will

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be characterized, not so much by fixed order, as by a certain orderliness, a mobility of mind and spirit, and an interior collectedness that will allow us to keep perspective and a sense of proportion in the midst of a multitude of responsibilities.

We will endeavor, then, to examine the customary pattern of our daily life, and to bring an order and regularity to it which will allow us control over the demands we must meet and the uses to be made of our time and energies. We will find opportunity daily to examine the claims that confront us for that particular day, giving those that require our attention their place in the scheme of things, and releasing ourselves from those which should make no serious demand upon us. Having disposed our affairs in this way, we can commit the day to God, asking his help to be faithful in the duties that fall to us, and asking his Spirit to tether us with a "leash of lovely longing" to him through the busy hours upon which we are entering.

Discipline and Decision Concerning Our Goals

But before we have done with our attempt to plan the day's use in a way that releases us into the continuing practice of God's presence, we have discovered that our problem lies much deeper than the organization of our time. There will always be time for the things we want most to do. That proverb, however, states our problem rather than solving it. What is required of us is decision as to the goals for which we are willing to spend ourselves.

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The practice of interior collectedness presses this decision upon us with particular urgency because of the kind of culture in which we live. The disintegrative, dispersing forces that bear upon men in our society make the struggle for integration and re-collection a strenuous battle indeed. Our economic system, as the editors of *Fortune* have pointed out, has put the individual in a "state of siege from dawn to bedtime. Nearly everything he sees, hears, tastes, touches, and smells is an attempt to sell him something. The only oases of peace . . . are the darkened sick rooms of the dying . . . and the depths of the national parks." ⁷

Not only is the individual tempted and distracted by these appeals to enjoy the abundance of good things produced by our technology; but once he succumbs, he must then give every waking hour to the strenuous and harassing task of paying for what he has bought. As millions of married women have joined the employed workers in our society, homes have ceased to be the havens of quietness and re-collection that they once might have been, and the hours after work of an evening are filled with the routine of household work. So dependent has our economic prosperity become upon increasing consumption of goods produced, that there is little likelihood of men and women having a "circumambient air of leisure" surrounding their daily life unless they resist the pressure to narrow their lives to the one function of being consumers, and set for themselves a standard of simplicity in living which does not chain them to hard labor in order to meet installment payments.

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At this level of decision, consequently, the person intent upon living a life of prayer will need to come to terms with the question of the standard of material comfort, abundance, and pleasure that he accepts for himself. He will have a double objective in working out this decision. On the one hand, he will seek a style of living that leaves him, as far as possible, unencumbered by the necessity of exhausting himself in order to pay for his wants, and by worry and discouragement arising from his inability to meet his expenditures. On the other, he will try to maintain himself in such simplicity that at least a part of his income and resources are available for those causes which call for his support. Here, the simplification of life—as a measure leading to a larger freedom for inward prayer—leads directly to the outgoing expression of that life in service to the kingdom of God.

But the simplification of our life at the level of our material needs and desires is only the first step in ordering our daily existence so as to make possible a greater measure of inward collectedness. Things, after all, are only means to ends; and when these goals remain undisciplined, insubordinate to any higher purposes, a man may give up great possessions, as St. Benedict reminded his followers, and still hanker after some small thing like a pencil.

The temptations and distractions that face us as the by-product of our “economy of abundance,” as economists now describe our material standard of living, have their counterpart in the allurements to an undisciplined life made popular by some schools of psychology.

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Warned of the harmful, explosive consequences of inhibiting or repressing instinctive desires and impulses, we are urged to "express ourselves." The shortcomings of such counsel appear in two forms. First, by the giving way to whatever impulse or desire is uppermost at the moment rather than freeing ourselves from its tyranny, we often establish patterns of behavior that only strengthen the hold of that impulse or appetite over us. And second, there remains the unresolved question: "Which self shall I express?"

The ingathering of the resources of our personal being, which is our preparation for receiving the in-pourings of God's re-creative power, will often require the making of heroic choices as to the desires, interests, and aspirations which are to control our lives. Jesus could commend a marriage feast by his presence and apparently enter into the lighthearted festivity that surrounded this most natural of all human needs: the making of a man and a woman to be one. But he could teach, also, that if circumstances required, a man must "hate his own father and mother and wife and children . . . yes, and even his own life," in order to be His disciple (Luke 14:26). No arbitrary scheme of living can be adequate for everyone alike. Each individual must work out the course that fits his particular needs, capacities, and situation. He must accept the risk and the struggle involved in finding his own way between the goodness of natural life and the demands of the self-denying will.

This discipline of our life at the level of its deeper desires will come about, not so much through restrictive

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measures, necessary as these may be at times, as through the transforming power of a higher love. The views of a young man or young woman about the relations between the sexes take on a new sobriety when marriage is imminent; and the meaning of married life grows to a new dimension of restraint and consecration when a child is born. Our final wisdom for the simplification of our life at every level may be that ascribed to St. Augustine, and again to Luther: "Love God and do as you like!" Not that our love for God gives us license to do as we please! When we offer him our love, we are met by the inpouring tide of his love for us; and this love, in Paul's words, "constrains us"—controls, impels, holds us back from all that would offend him, while it draws us on toward all that will be acceptable and pleasing to him.

For the problem of simplifying our whole manner of living—from its material, external desires and needs to those deepest, most subtle interior motives and aspirations—there is no easy solution. Of two things we can be certain: without our continuous striving to bring our life into a larger measure of simplification, we shall never come to that ingathering of our selves which is essential to any true growth in the life of prayer; and secondly, the ultimate as well as the immediate aim and means to that goal are to be found in our continuous endeavor to love God with all our mind and heart and soul and strength. In this sense, it is true to say that the rediscovery of prayer consists simply in our learning to love God more and more.

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The Ingathering Uses of Retreat

There remains one further aspect of the ingathering phase of the life of prayer which needs our attention. In our account of the prayer of confession, it was pointed out that a thoroughgoing examination of our need of forgiveness would require occasions when we could engage in unhurried reflection upon our past, in order to bring before God the deeper motives and attitudes that have actuated us and caused us to offend against his love. Other kinds of prayer, likewise, will require extended periods of time for their fullest use. While the daily half hour can serve to keep us in the practice of prayer from day to day, we will soon feel the need for providing ourselves with opportunity for a more sustained time for reflection, examination, meditation, and prayer.

Retirement from the pressures and disturbances of our routine life, in order to have some extended time for prayer in this way, is often referred to as making a retreat. The time, place, and manner of making a retreat will vary with individual circumstances and opportunities. Here we can describe briefly the more common forms.

1. *The Personal All-Day Retreat.* This form of individual retreat will prove most fruitful when made once a month, or as nearly that often as possible, and when the major part of the day—six hours, more or less—can be reserved for it. The place for retreat will depend upon available facilities. Freedom from disturbance,

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reasonable comfort, in some instances the advantages of paths for a walk or opportunity for a limited amount of simple work or exercise, are highly desirable considerations. While one can make a private retreat in his own home or office, there is much to be gained by a change of scene, getting away from surroundings which constantly remind us of our daily responsibilities. A country church open for such uses, the home of friends who understand the purpose of one's retirement, a secluded spot in a park or in the woods in favorable weather, can provide a helpful setting. Especially to be mentioned are the opportunities offered by established retreat houses, such as the monasteries of some church orders; or the less highly organized accommodations of retreat farms and communities, such as maintained by Kirkridge, Wainwright House, or Adelynrood, to name only a few. An increasing number of churches are securing farmsteads for retreat purposes; and many churches in rural settings might well take this work of providing retreat hospitality as a significant form of Christian service. The same opportunity to be of service is open to those who might open their homes for the use of others desiring to spend a day free from the trammels of their work and families, in order to have more time for prayer and renewal.

What use is to be made of the day of private retreat? This will depend upon the needs of the individual and his experience in being able to use a long interval fruitfully. For the beginner, the arrangement of the day in a simple order will be a great help. The time might well be divided into periods of an hour, each devoted to one

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of the aspects of prayer—adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession. Within that hour, some time can be given to devotional reading; the reading of the Bible; reflection upon one's needs and aspirations, and especially upon recalling the tokens and intimations of God's love that have come to one since the last time of extended prayer. Of course, a good portion of the hour will be given to prayer, vocal and silent.

Some people have found it helpful to break the continuity of the retreat by taking a walk, singing hymns, or even engaging in simple manual work. A man spending a day at a cabin in the woods may find it helpful to alternate his reading, meditation, and prayer with short intervals of sawing wood for the cabin fires. A woman not free to leave her own home for a day of retreat may set as her task the washing of windows or some other simple household work not in the line of a daily chore. When work of this kind is done, it should be used as a means of quiet relaxation from too sustained concentration in thinking and praying. It should be taken up into the mood of prayer and offered to God as a token of love and willing service to him.

As one gains experience in the use of a day of personal retreat, he will discover other ways of filling the time fruitfully. Two simple truths should guide and encourage him. The first is that the day will be helpful in proportion to the care he gives beforehand in preparing and planning for its use. The second is that once he enters upon the retreat, he then commits the outcome to God. The day may bring him no high moment of inspiration, no great release from heavy burdens, no joy-

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ful clarification of his confusions and anxieties. What he can believe, and be content in believing, is that God will give him according to his needs; therefore he can "rest in the Lord" and "commit his way unto Him."

2. *The Quiet Day.* The practice of a private day of retreat will be taken with more assurance if an individual has had the opportunity of making such a retreat in the company of a small group having the same intention. Such a day of retirement is often called a "Quiet Day." It is held usually at a convenient church, or retreat center, or in a private home of ample facilities. The amount of program included in the day will vary with the needs and experience of the group. A typical plan for the day would include an act of corporate worship at the beginning, followed by a meditation given by someone designated as leader, to set a theme or give guidance for the day's use. Where no instruction of this kind is needed or desired, the opening worship is followed by a time of silence, in which members of the group disperse to read, meditate, and pray as they would if making a private retreat.

At mealtime, one of the group may read from some book of devotional instruction or the biography of some person who has had deep experience in the practice of the Christian life. A work-period of a hour or more can be included in the day's schedule, if there is appropriate work to be done around the retreat center or church and if this seems the best use of the time available. The afternoon hours continue in silence, with perhaps a second instruction. The day is then brought to a close by

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a gathering of those present for corporate silence, out of which each is free to speak of any insights, needs, or concerns he wishes to bring to the group. Occasionally a simple observance of the Lord's Supper concludes the day.

Quiet Days of this kind can be of great help to the individual who is inexperienced in the use of extended times of prayer. It does not provide the sustained, intensified solitude that the day of private retreat gives. On the other hand, it serves as a very useful means for quickening the life of a group who have joined in the life of prayer, to be described in a later chapter.

3. *The Extended Retreat.* Beyond these days of private or group retirement, there will be need for those who intend to go on in the life of prayer to make an occasional retreat, at least once a year, in a more extended way. Opportunity for retreats of this kind are offered in a number of retreat centers, such as those already mentioned. The period of retreat may last from a week end to an entire week, or even longer. The program provides the elements of the Benedictine rule of study, work, and prayer through instruction by the retreat leader; periods of silence for reading and meditation; corporate worship; occasional work-sessions; and hours for group exchange of experience and questions. The growing literature about retreats makes any detailed description of them unnecessary here.

The need for making such a retreat can be suggested by comparing it to the commonly accepted need for a vacation. A "vacation with pay" has come to be ac-

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cepted as a standard prerogative of working people in our society. The retreat, however, is not so much a vacation, in the sense of an escape from the dull routine of daily work, as it is a pilgrimage to a center where the atmosphere of enclosure and worship encourages that interior withdrawal which we have been describing as the first movement in the rhythm of the life of prayer. Here one seeks to open himself in a larger way to the intrusion of God's love, and to offer himself in fuller commitment to the service of his will.

A retreat has been called a "time alone with God," in which the individual stands in his solitary condition of responding "Yes" or "No" to the call of God to enter into communion with him. A retreat can be, also, a time of fellowship with those to whom the Christian is joined in Christ. Not only the mutual exchanges in thought and the common offering of hymns and prayers but the deeper intimacies of the silence create the assurance of a new life shared by all who have come to know the love of God as the ground of their being, and have turned themselves to seek him in prayer.

We can gather up our consideration of this first movement of the alternating rhythm of prayer, then, by saying that the full life of prayer requires the steady cultivation and disciplining of the practice of interior withdrawal, in order that the disintegrative forces impinging on us be stayed; and the recreative, reintegrative powers within us, poured into us by the grace of God, may have their chance to heal and renew and transform us. The end we desire is that sustained prac-

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tice of the presence of God which envelopes all our thought and activity in the atmosphere of prayer and keeps us under a sense of constant communion with him. But that ideal comes late, and after long seeking. On our way to it, we must bring our life under a discipline of withdrawal which can further us toward that goal.

We have seen that there are three statements of rule which can well find a place in our ordered life of prayer:

1. To settle upon a careful plan for each day's use.
2. To simplify our life at every level of need, desire, or aspiration, in order that the love and service of God can be our constraining principle.
3. To make occasional retreat, privately or in groups or for an extended time, in order to carry to deeper levels the practice of prayer.

We shall turn in the next chapter to the complementary phase of this rhythm, and concern ourselves with the outgoing aspects of the life of prayer.

The Outgoing Action of Prayer

FROM THE INGATHERING ASPECT of the life of prayer, we turn now to the second movement in its fundamental rhythm: the outgoing life of active work and service, accepted as our service to God and offered for the needs of our fellow men. We are more familiar with this phase of our life with God, and perhaps more ready to acknowledge our responsibility toward it. The teachings of the Bible come to our mind: that sacrifice, without justice, is offensive to God (Isaiah 1:11-17); or that "inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:31-46); or, "If any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (I John 3:17. RSV).

Yet in seeing the practice of prayer and the life of serving as two phases of this rhythm of life lived in the

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fullest communion with God, we must avoid the temptation to regard them as unrelated, if not antagonistic, aspects of one inclusive life. A wise and consecrated mingling of praying *and* serving, worked out with careful consideration of our particular personal circumstance, must be kept before us as our aim. When Florence Nightingale was visited by the Aga Khan in the later years of her career, she described for him the changes she had witnessed in her lifetime—in ventilation, drainage, hospital management, control of infection. When she finished, there was a pause, and then her visitor asked, “Do you think you are improving?” Taken aback, Florence Nightingale replied, “What do you mean by ‘improving’?” “Believing more in God,” answered the Aga Khan. “A most interesting man,” she wrote later, “but you could never teach him sanitation!”¹

Differences in temperament, in capacities, in educational and cultural backgrounds, in opportunities, will dispose some people to a life of contemplative retirement, others to a life of strenuous activity in good causes. But the full life of prayer does not permit us to separate the two. Believing more in God ought to stir us to a zeal for plumbing, where plumbing means health, cleanliness, and human decency rather than disease, squalor, and human degradation. And a concern for improved sanitation will find its motive in the hope that when people can live cleanly, decent lives, they will be able to believe more in God.

In the community of prayer, room will be found for both the contemplative and the active life. Some, after

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the example of Jesus, will be led to give themselves unstintingly to the work of relieving, healing, and redressing injustice. Others will follow the same Master and, "seeing the multitudes," will "go up into the mountain to pray." Neither will be free to claim their particular form of devotion to God as an excuse for neglecting the other side of this inclusive life.

This unity of prayer and work in one common life arises from our understanding of the life of God himself. He with whom we seek to enter into communion is himself both perfect re-collectedness, the fully ingathered life in all its peace, clarity, and transforming power; and at the same time, most dynamic, creative life, intentional activity, unceasing in his work of ordaining and maintaining his creation. John Ruysbroeck, the fourteenth-century mystic, wrote of this dual life of God, "Tranquility according to His essence, activity according to His nature; perfect stillness, perfect fecundity!"² Jesus, whose practice of retirement in loving communion with God could find its expression in his saying, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), could say also, "My Father is working still, and I am working" (John 5:17. RSV).

Our simple relations with one another may help us to see how this truth about God bears upon our life of prayer. When a valued friend comes to visit in our home, we may spend the time together in various ways. We may sit through winter hours by the fire, or in summer among the flowers in the garden, conversing of things mutually dear and intimate. Fragrant memories will be revived; old bonds, formed in the past, renewed.

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Or, we may go briskly on with our work about the house, the office, on the street, in the field, letting him follow us around as we busy ourselves with these daily affairs—throwing off snatches of talk, inquiries about his life, hurried explanations about the things we are doing, and excuses for not being free to sit down to visit now. Our visitor will gather some notion of what goes on in our life from day to day; but when he departs, we will feel disappointed that we really didn't have time to share something of our life with him.

The third possibility is that we take this friend into both phases of our life. We will find some quiet hours when we can sit together and "invite our souls," allowing the memories of the past to rise slowly into our speech, and sending forth the first new tentacles of affection to bind us together for the years to come. Yet, also, we will give him a part in our daily work—bringing out a pair of dungarees and work shoes from the closet, taking him with us through our place of employment, letting him get the feeling of struggle, sweat, and satisfaction we have in our work. When he can enter into both aspects of our life, both our guest and ourselves will discover that we have grown together into a richer consciousness of the bonds of common living and affection that unite us.

In some such way our human experience throws its faint light upon the life we seek with God. Because he is perfect rest, peace, joy, we withdraw into his presence, where we may be still and know that he is God, exalted above all that men can think or say or do. Because he is continuous creative life, ceaseless in his pur-

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pose and activity—because he is working still—we in our weak, inconstant way strive to work, so that when we have entered into his creative life we may also enter into his joy. Because we are human, limited to the doing of one thing, or at best a few things, at one time in one place, we must live out this dual life of interior retirement and outgoing action as more or less alternating kinds of activity. But we do not divide the two and oppose them. Our ideal will be the simultaneous life of prayer and work, of interior quiet and exterior action, which is in the very life of God himself.

Our Work for God as Vocation

We considered in the preceding chapter some of the concrete ways in which the practice of interior retirement could be undertaken. Let us now describe the life of outreach and of service through which we express our devotion to God, and in the doing of which we seek to participate in his creative life.

We can begin by taking to ourselves the words of Jesus we have just repeated: "My Father is working still; and I am working." It may be that Jesus spoke these words in the consciousness of a unique relationship between God and himself. We do not presume that our relationship with God can be identical with his. But there is ample reason for thinking that Jesus expected men to enter into a new and creative relationship with God, the limits of which are fixed not by our creaturely powers but only by God's love and mercy

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toward us. If this were not true, little of what we have been saying about prayer could have much meaning.

We take for ourselves these words, then: "My Father is working, and I am working," and through them we set down for ourselves the first specific principle that is to govern our life of prayer in its outgoing movement. By appropriating these words, we are declaring that the full life of prayer requires us to think of all of our life of work, enterprise, and activity as being the work God has set us to do.

The familiar name for this conception of our active life is the term "vocation." In present-day discussion, the word "vocation" has been eroded of much of this sense of doing the will of God. It has come to stand for the choice of the particular occupation or profession in which a person engages. Vocational guidance attempts to discover the aptitudes an individual possesses that fit him for a particular occupation, and to help him find motivation for pursuing the kind of employment or professional practice for which he seems best suited. An unconscious, perhaps unintended, by-product of this kind of vocational guidance is the assumption that an individual's lifework is fairly well determined for him by factors outside his control.

The Christian meaning of vocation may be sharpened if we use its Anglo-Saxon counterpart and speak of it as our "calling." A "calling" implies that we are summoned by a voice, an intimation, an insight—by a Person—to the work we are expected to do. Although that "call" may not come—for most persons probably will not come—in anything like the impression of an audible voice

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speaking to us, there will come into our consciousness the convincing sense that there is some particular use for our life, our abilities, our time, toward which God is drawing us.

In earlier times, Christian vocation was limited rather exclusively to service in the church or on the mission field. An unfortunate consequence of this restriction of Christian callings was to dispose the farmer, the carpenter, the lawyer, the scientist, to think of his work as being outside the realm of religious occupation or responsibility. His "Christian" duty was discharged when he contributed to good causes or to the support of those who were called to religious professions, or by occasional good works, such as ushering at church or sitting up nights with a sick neighbor.

Today, the kinds of daily work and service which can constitute our Christian calling are almost limitless. The increasing variety of kinds of work and of professional pursuits in our modern society has done much to break down the older idea of Christian vocation. The work of the minister or the missionary today can hardly be distinguished, at many significant points, from the work of the teacher, the doctor, the psychologist, the community engineer. Human welfare, both material and spiritual, now depends upon the contributions of men and women in a wide variety of professions and occupations, so that serving God by serving mankind is today the responsibility and the opportunity of persons in all walks of life. With Browning's Pippa, the girl from the silk mills, we can sing the New Year's hymn:

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*All service ranks the same with God:
If now, as formerly he trod
Paradise, his presence fills
Our earth, each only as God wills
Can work—God's puppets, best and worst,
Are we; there is no last nor first! ³*

But the very fact that we can take, as our vocation, one out of so great a variety of occupations can be the source of our temptation. If all service ranks the same with God, there is the possibility that we will make our choice without ever asking whether it can stand *for us* as the work we are called by God to do. Since almost any kind of honorable employment can be said to perform some needful service to mankind, we may be content to determine our choice upon private and immediate considerations—the appeal of salary, the pleasantness of associates and working conditions, the attraction of certain individuals engaged in a particular profession, the example or advice of an influential teacher. All of these may have some place in our final decision; but they are not to displace or to outweigh the primary fact of our life: that we belong to God and are created for his service and his praise, let these amenities and inducements be what they may!

The Tests of a Christian's Vocation

The Christian is required to choose his lifework, therefore, only after answering whether the pursuit he takes for his own can be the one to which God has called him. How can a Christian vocation be described?

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It ought to be a vocation which serves the purpose of God and the needs of men. In the creation poem, the first chapter of Genesis, God commands Adam, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). In obedience to this command, Adam is to have his part in the creation which God looks upon and pronounces "very good."

If we can find any purpose in the creation of the universe, and the bringing into existence of human life, then these words can still suggest to us the basic principle in our own vocation. We are expected to make fruitful use of all the resources of the universe about us, to master them for the betterment of human life, and to bring the raw creation into a higher state of use and beauty. Not only the physical needs of mankind—food, clothing, shelter, and the healing of the body's ailments—but the hungers of the mind and the spirit are to be served. The farmer, the soapmaker, the doctor, are called to have their part in this great enterprise. So, too, are the teacher, the artist, the gardener, the scientist, the designer of homes and of apparel, the ornithologist and conservationist, the librarian—yes, and the athlete, the explorer, the linotypist. The economy of God aims at a life for mankind filled with every richness and joy and means of growth. The first test of a man's vocation will be whether he is serving this intention of God by the work he does.

But this generous and inclusive estimate of the ways

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in which we can have our part in God's work and purpose should not lead us to suppose that, in our particular times and society, any kind of occupation can be justified as serving the needs of men and the glory of God. The needs of man as stimulated or perverted under the lash of advertising and promotional techniques cannot be taken as a sound guide to the choice of our vocation. No narrow asceticism will be implied by saying that, in our society, many more people are engaged in the production of such commodities as tobacco, alcoholic liquors, cosmetics—perhaps, even, of automobiles—than would be necessary if the appetites of consumers for smoking, drinking, self-adornment, and pleasurable and sometimes purposeless locomotion were not aggravated by sales pressures and advertising promotion. We must ask ourselves seriously, when we choose an occupation or accept employment, whether we are allowing ourselves to be caught up in the service of these indulgence trades or in their artificial and excessive stimulation.

Closely connected with this criterion concerning the place our labor has in the purpose and will of God for human life is the question of the moral character of the work we do. Many men and women today work under conditions in which they can exercise little responsibility for the moral quality of the work they perform. An operator in a factory manufacturing electrical appliances has little to say about the honesty and dependability of the finished product. He can answer only for the particular part or operation that he contributes to the article. Responsibility for the total product rests

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with his superiors, with the company executives, with the directors, the stockholders.

But can he excuse himself, therefore, from responsibility for taking part in the making of an appliance that is shoddy and dishonest? Is he not responsible for knowing something about the product to which his work contributes? Can he continue to work in that factory, knowing that its output is morally dishonest, without gravely endangering the sensitivity of his own conscience and the integrity and peace of his own inner life? Can he really pray as long as he acquiesces in the perversion of his labor? Must not the same questions be asked of himself by the lawyer, the newspaper reporter, the bank cashier, the college professor, the manager of the supermarket, whenever the accepted practices for the conduct of their professions or business contradict the sense of moral integrity which is the first condition for our life with God?

To be sure, men and women often are caught in circumstances not easily brought under control of their personal will. Every vocation has its temptations; few can afford us a perfect calling, free from all possibility of corrupting intrusions. But the question that probes our conscience, like the scalpel of the surgeon cutting into infected flesh, is this: are we acting up to the limit of our ability to make sure that the work we do and the way we do it can stand, approved, before God? "It is not too much to say," writes Emma Herman, "that two-thirds of those who plead uncongenial"—and we might add, compromising—"work as an excuse for their lack of spiritual joy and vigour, could change their em-

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ployment tomorrow if they were willing to pay the price.”⁴ The figure of two-thirds may overstate the point, but the essential conclusion still holds true for many more people in our society than may be ready to act upon it.

Often when a man determines to make that kind of change of employment in order to follow more truly his vocation as he sees it, he will discover the price is not as great as he had anticipated, nor the obstacles as insurmountable. One of the misconceptions of the practice of vocational guidance in its earlier stages lay in the assumption that an individual's possibilities, as measured by tests of his aptitudes, must be taken as quite definitely fixed. That rigid view has had to give way to one that allows more room for the functioning of motives in determining the work a person can successfully undertake.

Christian history is filled with instances of individuals, most incapable and unpromising, who become martyrs, saints, and conquering heroes under the transforming motive of a consuming love for God and a desire to serve him with mind, heart, soul, and strength. None of us really knows what God can do with and through us if we give ourselves fully to the creative work which God can release in us. Our response to the call to God's service always involves the taking of risk, the prospect of hardship and insecurity as the accompaniments of our course. But we need not hesitate overly long counting the cost. We can commit ourselves to him and the doing of his will, in the assurance that

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his grace is sufficient for our need and his work is fashioned into perfection out of our human weakness.

Making a Vocation of Our Work and Life

Much that has been said thus far concerns the choice of a particular lifework as the vocation to which God calls us. Not all who read these pages stand at the point in life where they are free to make that kind of decision. For some, the choice was made, or should have been made, long ago; and the course of the past cannot now be altered. For others, circumstances have restricted greatly the number of alternatives within their reach. Nor is it likely, even in our society, that opportunities can be found for everyone to enter a vocation which will have for him a definite religious significance. It may even be questioned whether the kingdom of God would be advanced or hindered if everyone found his vocation in overt religious forms of lifework.

But something has been implied concerning the vocational significance of all kinds of honest and productive labor. While some persons must find their vocations in occupations having the possibility of definite religious significance, the vocation of many others will consist in taking the work they now do and turning it into true service to God and men.

In our time, no man more fully represents the ideal of a life completely given over to the service of God than does Albert Schweitzer. Yet when he abandoned a career as a distinguished scholar and teacher, and another as an organist and interpreter of Bach, in order to

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minister to the suffering people of Lambarine, he was aware that the particular course he took was not a course that everyone can imitate. "Of all the will for the ideal which exists in mankind," he wrote, "only a small part can be manifested in action. . . . The hidden forces of goodness are embodied in those persons who carry on as a secondary pursuit the immediate personal service which they cannot make their life-work." ⁵

How can the sense of Christian vocation in these "secondary pursuits" be expressed and realized? At least three suggestions can be made. First, in whatever work we do, we can try consciously to think of the meaning of that work as our service to men and our offering of ourselves to the will of God. The entire venture toward the rediscovery of prayer, as we have seen often in these pages, has as one of its means of advancement the making conscious and intentional our thought of God, that so easily settles into an unconscious neglect.

The way a man looks upon his work will have a decisive influence on whether he does it as his vocation. Sir George MacLeod, of the Iona Community, relates a conversation between a Scotch clergyman and a workman riding together on a train. The cleric managed to guide the conversation into religious topics, and finally asked the man beside him, "As a Christian, what do you do?" "I bake bread," the man replied. "Yes, I know. But as a *Christian*, what do you do?" "I bake bread," was the steady response.

Holding one's work steadily on the beam of this conscious intention to do it "as a Christian" will prove to be a means of opening new insights into the signifi-

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cance, the possibilities—and the temptations—which one's employment involves. John Woolman, while clerking in a store, was asked to write a bill of sale for the transfer of a Negro slave. "The thing was sudden," he wrote, "... yet I remembered I was hired by the year ... so through weakness, I gave way and wrote." But the next time he was asked to write "an instrument of slavery for one of my fellow-creatures," he was prepared to decline the request and to give his reasons for doing so. The matter did not end there. Some years later, the man whose request he had declined with reasons came to have Woolman draw his will, with the direction that all the man's slaves should be given their freedom.⁶

When a man steadily applies his mind to the intention of seeing his work as his service before God, he will find himself prepared against those things that are "sudden"; and by his own attitude toward the work he does, by his integrity of conscience, his purposefulness, and his sense of quiet joy which these generate, he will become in his occupation a bearer of "hidden forces of goodness," exercising their unseen effects upon the lives of those with whom he works.

The second suggestion for expressing our work is this: we can use the circumstances and associations that attend our work as opportunities for bearing a witness for our faith in God, and for helping others to bring their lives under the light of that faith. For many people, the daily work they are doing does not come anywhere near occupying all of their attention or capability. It can be done with their hands, with reflexes acquired

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through long experience. Their minds are idle, their tongues free, their fancies and impulses at liberty to range over all the wild pastures of their desires, disappointments, conflicts, resentments. So, they will talk, and mostly about themselves.

The Christian workman among them can stand ready to "speak to their condition" as they unwittingly reveal what they are and what their life has come to be. He will need to be "wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove"; and often will discover that he is serving best by being a patient, understanding, although not sentimentally sympathetic, listener. As he listens, he will hold himself open to the leading of the Spirit as to what and when he should speak; or he will remain silent, quietly holding up to God this person, who so unwittingly pours out his self-revelation.

In every store, factory, office, or institution where men and women work together in any numbers, it soon becomes clear who among them holds things together; who can be trusted with confidences; who creates the unconscious atmosphere of congeniality, of respect for one's fellows, of honesty and care in workmanship. And it becomes known, too, who it is that one can turn to in some sore need of heart for the healing and encouragement so desperately sought. No amount of improvement of the external conditions under which people work—hours, rest periods, ventilation, lighting, noise control—can really take from their labor the sense of boredom, of irresponsibility, of frustration, that menial or oversimplified tasks induce. What is required most critically, in our present society, is a quality of personal

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life permeating, redeeming, the whole lives of the people who work. It is the calling of every Christian to stand as one whom God can use as a channel for pouring out to them his redemptive grace.

The Service of God as Our Avocation

The third channel for the expression of our vocation might be properly called the finding of our Christian "avocation," the "secondary pursuits which we cannot make our life-work." These consist in the causes, the concerns, the enterprises, we undertake, outside the range of our working day, as our particular service to the needs of other people and the channel through which we offer ourselves to God, for his use.

The increased amount of leisure time available to us in our society has made it possible for many people to complement their working hours with creative or re-creative activities. The proprietor of a tailoring shop devotes his hours free from trade to being a member of a bowling team, and the conductor of a community male chorus. Filling-station attendants, public accountants, and butchers drill assiduously evening after summer evening to perfect their maneuvers as a fife-and-drum corps. A financial expert glows as he describes the intellectual and social satisfaction he receives from participating in a discussion group meeting weekly at the public library for the study of Great Books.

In a similar way, those who seek to fill up the life of prayer through active participation in the work of God will discover their opportunity in avocational services

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gravely needing help. During World War II, the shortage of personnel brought from hospitals a call for lay men and women to volunteer their services for performing simple, menial tasks in the wards and sickrooms. Some individuals who were confined to a hospital bed during those critical days will recall the ministry of these volunteers. Lacking professional skill, often clumsy in setting a tray or straightening a pillow, they brought to the patient's troubled spirit a silent reminder that there still remained a world in which men and women care about the sufferings of others and give themselves to cheering the sufferer, without asking what the pay or the hours of service are going to be.

The passing of the war has not brought an end to the critical need for volunteers in our hospitals, our welfare institutions, and in the less organized life of our communities. In a society where even the baby-sitters demand union rates, there is still room for the woman who is willing, now that her own children are grown and gone, to take over for an afternoon, a day, a week end, the small children of young parents, in order that they may have time for their own personal retreat and for quiet waiting upon God. In an urban culture that dooms many of its children to know no other life than the crowded streets at the bottom of apartment-house canyons, there is work for the family living in a quiet country town—to take as their guests for a month's summer holiday children from these slums. And there is urgent need on committees, boards, and co-operative groups in our charitable and redemptive organizations, not to say in the political organizations that are the backbone of

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our civic life, for consecrated men and women who will make these pursuits their avocation for the service of mankind and the praise of God.

To the rules in which we summarized the ingathering aspects of the life of prayer, we can now add these concerned with its outgoing movement:

1. To choose our lifework, as far as we are free to do so, in the light of the particular use of our life to which God calls us.
2. To use the circumstances and opportunities that attend our daily work, whatever it may be, for bearing witness to our faith and for helping others, always consciously thinking of our work as the offering of ourselves to God.
3. To take for ourselves an avocation, a free service outside the range of our daily work, given to causes, concerns, and helpful enterprises, as an expression of our love for God and for mankind.

“What a man takes in by contemplation, he must pour out in love,” wrote Meister Eckhart. In that rhythm of prayer and action, of withdrawal and return, of interior waiting upon God and exterior action in the doing of his will, the life of prayer becomes total, inclusive, the complete offering of ourselves to him who has made us to glorify him by our labor, as we are to enjoy him forever in our prayer.

Devotional Reading

DURING HIS TRAVELS in the mountainous regions of Tibet, Marco Pallis came to a Tibetan monastery where young students were training for the priesthood. When a student was handed a book to read, he reports, he first would lay it on his head and offer a prayer that he might be helped to profit by its wisdom.¹ This simple act of piety illuminates our own practice of prayer. There can be no real growth in that life unless we are feeding our minds with the experience, insights, and visions handed on to us by those who have gone farther than we on this journey toward the life of communion with God. As has been suggested in earlier chapters, the nurture we require can be found in the contemplation of art, in response to music, or in the dedicated study of the natural world, as well as in our reading. But for many, reading will be found to be the chief and indis-

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pensable means for keeping our spiritual hunger keen, our vision bright, and our inner life strong.

Reading for the purpose of spiritual nurture is often spoken of as "devotional reading." The term implies two related meanings. It refers to the kind of literature read—the treatises on prayer, the autobiographical accounts of religious pilgrimages, the meditations and affirmations offered us by great souls of the past and present. But it also implies the way in which we approach the reading of any serious matter, and the purpose for which we read. It would be quite possible to read one of the great "devotional classics" in a manner and for a purpose that could hardly be counted as devotional reading—as a student might read, for example, who wishes to cite the contents of a classic in the thesis he is writing. It is quite possible, also, to read a book of biography, travel, political theory, or astronomy, in such a way that a true devotional intention governs our response to the book. Both of these meanings of "devotional reading," which stands as the title for this chapter, will be considered more fully as we proceed.

The Uses of Devotional Reading

Devotional reading, in the sense of the kind of literature we read, serves our need in at least four ways. In the first place, it can give us guidance in the practice of prayer. The ways of praying are almost as varied as the people who have prayed. Since prayer is essentially a creative meeting of persons with The Person, we should expect that no two individuals would ever

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find their practice to be identical. We have had occasion, earlier, to say that any discussion of the ways and meaning of praying must always take into account this uniqueness of personal experience; it must always allow for the varieties of prayer that are suited to persons of varied backgrounds, capacities, and experience.

Yet this is far from saying that the ways in which different individuals have prayed have nothing in common. However great the variations, certain strong, central principles are encountered and reaffirmed, again and again. No one can hope to grow in the life of prayer if he allows his way of praying to wander wherever his momentary impulse may lead him. It can be taken as an indication of his earnestness in prayer that, sooner or later, he abandons this sort of self-direction and turns to the wisdom and experience of others, saying, "Teach me to pray."

When he reads the accounts and descriptions of prayer given by the students and masters of prayer, he will find their diversity a source of stimulation and enrichment. Whether he takes for himself the pattern of prayer taught by Francis de Sales, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, or by William Law, in his *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, or by Henry N. Wierman, in his modern *Methods of Private Religious Living*, will depend somewhat upon his personal need and temperament. It may be that he will try first one, then another of such methods. It is even more likely that he will not follow any of them entirely, but as his experience grows, he will draw suggestions and insights from several sources to build together his own way of pray-

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ing. If he is careful not to indulge simply in devising a patchwork of ill-fitting notions, he will begin to find certain common denominators among the treatises on prayer which he reads. Out of these he can undertake the slow and patient shaping of his own practice. Not what he learns *about* praying, but what he can take and use for himself, will be the purpose which guides his study. He will be greatly helped by the discovery that the journey he is undertaking has been made by others, and that they have left some account of what they found on the way to give him cheer and guidance.

In the second place, devotional reading can give us a firmer grasp of the essential faith upon which all our praying is founded. The great books on the devotional life are not treatises in theology; but those which are truly great are firmly grounded on theological principles. Although a study of theology sometimes contributes more to facility and subtlety in speaking about faith than it does to a profound understanding of the meaning of faith in human experience, it must be said, also, that praying which ignores the theological foundations of our belief tends to become trivial and sentimental.

Simple men and women sometimes come to a depth of understanding in prayer, and a power in the practice of it, quite beyond that of those who are better informed in matters of theology. Often, however, these simple persons have come to a deep understanding of the central themes of our faith: the nature of God; the meaning of human life; the work and significance of Jesus Christ, in his life and death and resurrection; and

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the living presence of the Holy Spirit, as the most immediate and illuminating fact of our daily existence. In no sense can they be called "ignorant"; nor can their praying be regarded as powerful *because* they are uneducated.

Most persons reading these pages cannot go back to an artificially induced simpleness of living or thinking, merely to give new vitality to their prayer. But we can and must try to increase our understanding of the doctrines essential to our Christian faith, and to make these the underpinning, reaching to bedrock, upon which our life of prayer is to be built.

Here the great devotional books can help us. The true book of devotion is never limited in its concern simply to external methods of praying. It always derives its teaching about the way of prayer from its assumptions about God and our life with him. "For He lingered not, but ran, calling aloud by words, deeds, death, life, descent, ascension; crying aloud to us to return to Him," wrote Augustine.² In these words he gives us not only the theme of all that long pursuit of his soul by the irresistible love of God, which makes up his narrative, but also the key to all that glorious vision of the Being of God, which causes Augustine, again and again, to break into rapturous praise of him.

When we read such passages in our devotions; when we ponder on Baron von Hügel's "The Facts and Doctrines Concerning God Which Are of Especial Importance in the Life of Prayer,"³ beginning with, "God is a stupendously rich Reality—the alone boundlessly rich reality"; or when we hear Fénelon exclaiming, "Happy

he who lets God cut the full width of the cloth!"⁴—we turn to our prayer with a new sense of the spaciousness, the solidity, and the grandeur of the faith within which we hold intercourse with God. Although prayer, as direct communion with God, does not depend upon our ability to state our knowledge about him in intellectual formulations, it does depend upon the scope and richness of our thoughts of God. If prayer is to become increasingly real for us, and if it is to transform us into new and richer persons, we must nurture it with reading that gives us a more profound understanding of the faith which makes prayer possible.

The third purpose served by devotional reading follows from the second. There is laid upon us, as Evelyn Underhill says, the duty of "filling the mind with the noblest possible thoughts about God, refusing unworthy and narrow conceptions, and keeping alight the fire of His love." But this duty goes deeper than a surface activity of the mind. It requires us to nurture a "richly stored religious consciousness."⁵ Our conscious thinking and acting draws upon the great reservoirs of our unconscious mind, as the marvelous pools in Yellowstone Park take their vivid colors from the mineral-laden waters springing up from subterranean channels. If we are not soon to exhaust our interest in praying, and to find our thought of God eroded and sterile, we will need to be continually impregnating our mind, at all its levels, with the ideas, language, and symbols of devotion. Not surface-spraying but root-feeding keeps the gardener's lawn green and thriving through the hot stretches of late summer. Our devotional reading is not

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intended to acquire information about, but to saturate ourselves in, the love and the will of God. The writer in Proverbs understood the connection between this feeding of inner life and our exterior activities: "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

Fourthly, devotional reading brings us into the presence of the great souls of the ages, where they can speak to us of their personal experience in communion with God. The practice of prayer, like the practice of the great arts, is essentially a personal venture. Whereas a science is always trying to eliminate the personal element from its discoveries and theories, the arts frankly try to bring the personal element into their understanding and expression of truth. A musical composition is a personal testimony of the artist to the vision of truth given him, in a way that a scientific discovery never can be.

As a result, although we expect one scientific discovery to displace its predecessors, one great work of art never supplants another. The *Iliad*, and *Macbeth*, and *The Waste Land*, all can be true, and all will continue to be true even when a greater poem still may be written. They do not depend upon a knowledge of the personal lives of Homer, or Shakespeare, or Eliot, in order for us to understand and respond to them. Essentially they are revelations of truth and beauty through the personality of their authors. When we read them, we cannot be indifferent to a sense of being in the presence of these men, through whom the light breaks so gloriously and sharply on our human scene.

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So the revelations given about prayer by the great lovers of God in all the centuries bear this personal testimony of their authors. All are true in their measure, and yet none will prevent us from reading, accepting, and taking inwardly to ourselves the witness of others. Through them we enter not only into an understanding of the truth about prayer, but even more into a personal relationship with the "communion of saints"—which is both the essence and the glory of the Christian life.

The Practice of Devotional Reading

With these purposes for our reading of devotional literature in mind, we can draw some suggestions about the way in which the reading can be done. It will have become apparent that devotional reading differs in purpose and in practice from other reading. Most of the reading done by people in our time could be characterized as being either acquisitive or escapist. We read to acquire knowledge, to get hold of information necessary to our professional work or our daily responsibilities. Even the student devotes most of his study to the acquisition of knowledge, often without any desire to turn this information into the substance of his own thinking.

The acquisitive motive, however, goes beyond such useful and necessary purposes. It appears more subtly in the desire to be "widely read," to be "up" on the best sellers, or to be known as a kind of walking compendium of astonishing, even though irrelevant, information. "What book *reviews* have you been reading

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lately?" one affluent lady asks her guest at tea, in a contemporary cartoon. "For whom is Cleopatra's Needle in Central Park named?" asks the quiz-master in the television contest, and a thousand dollars goes to the lucky respondent. The reader of religious literature is not immune to this temptation. He may regard the quantity of his reading as a sign that he "hungers and thirsts after righteousness." But he still is acquisitive at heart, and his reward will be the reward of the acquisitive: spiritual pride—and spiritual indigestion!

Reading as a means of "escape" is also a familiar activity in our time. There is one sense in which we all need such reading. Flights of fancy and of serious imagination can be the means by which we rise to know visions of truth, new breadths of sympathy and compassion, and new integration of ourselves personally—as more than one father has discovered when reading with his children a book such as Kenneth Graham's *Wind in the Willows*. A prominent composer and teacher of music has described how a casual meeting with Vachel Lindsay led on to a time when he heard Lindsay read his poem, "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan," and how, from that reading (the escapist poem of an indubitably escapist poet!), he gained a new conception of the significance and the possibilities of American music, and was inspired to compose on new American themes.⁶ Our reading of devotional literature should serve to lift us on soarings of mind and spirit toward God, from which, now and again, we can feel—

*... like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken.⁷*

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But clear distinction must be made between the kind of "escape" reading that carries us to new levels of inspiration, and wisdom, and hope; and the kind which keeps us earthbound because it demands little or no stretching of our wings, or because it aggravates and makes inveterate our baser emotions, and fixates our fears and hatreds by providing us with scenes, actions, and characters through which we can release our own worst impulses. Although devotional literature would seem to have no connection with reading material of this kind, there is always the temptation that we will indulge ourselves in it for the purpose of escaping from the demands of life into emotional gratifications of a more refined, but none the less objectional, sort. No book allows us less flight from life, or from God, than the Bible; but many people have been able to read it as though it were only a sanctified escape hatch! Whether the Bible is "escapist reading" or not depends upon the reader's purpose as he approaches it. The same is true for his reading of any devotional literature.

The purpose of devotional reading, then, is neither acquisitive, nor escapist. It is meant to be, rather, nourishing and re-creative. This means that the reader must turn to his reading in an attitude of open-minded receptiveness. He does not seek to find flaws in the author's reasoning or to criticize his account of the life of prayer. He listens to what the writer tries to say, open to any truth or insight or vision that comes from the book's pages. As von Hügel wisely says, reading that is devotional in purpose avoids a critical attitude, or any antagonism derived from our own thoughts, as it also avoids

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any forcing of ourselves to accept or agree with the author against our will. It is meant, rather, "to feed the heart, to fortify the will—to put these into contact with God—thus by the book to get away from the book to the reality it suggests."⁸ We do not read indiscriminately. Nor do we hold our judgment in abeyance in sentimental charity toward everyone who prints his ideas about prayer. But when the book strains our credulity or arouses the spirit of dispute in us, we lay it aside and conclude that for the time being at least it is not for us. Or we take from it what we can understand and put to use in our own practice of the life of prayer, and are not disturbed that we cannot master and appropriate all the book tries to teach.

The more we yield to this attitude of open and humble receptiveness, the more we will come to see that a book's power to speak to our need depends upon the timeliness of our taking it up. Rainer Rilke's advice to a young poet applies also to our devotional reading: "No book, any more than a helpful word, can do anything decisive if the person concerned is not already prepared through quite invisible influences for a deeper receptivity and absorption, if his hour for self-communion has not come."⁹

There is no sure way of knowing in advance whether a particular book comes to us in this fortunate "hour of self-communion." We may need to explore it more than once before it begins to take hold upon us. Guides and introductions to the great classics, such as Douglas V. Steere's *Doors Into Life* and Gaius Glenn Atkins' *Pilgrims of the Lonely Road*, can inform us about the mes-

sage of certain devotional works and can quicken our interest in them. By making note of books that are commended to us, we can be prepared, when the right time comes, to undertake their serious reading. Often the reading of a biography of the author of a devotional book will draw us on with new expectations to the reading of the book itself.

Such an attitude of openness to receive the book's light, and a patience in waiting until its hour to speak to us has come, will help to keep us from the temptation, already mentioned, to read devotional literature in order to pride ourselves on the range and versatility of our reading. We should be free, rather, to acknowledge how little we seem to have read thus far in our course, or to confess honestly that although *The Imitation of Christ* surely stands among the world's great treasures of devotion, we ourselves have not yet been able to find it speaking directly and helpfully to us.

We shall come, also, to understand that a few great books, deeply pondered and humbly received, will serve us better than swiftly acquired information concerning a library of devotion. Speaking of the few books read by Abraham Lincoln in his early years, Lord Charnwood wrote, "There is some advantage merely in being driven to make the most of a few books; great advantage in having one's choice restricted by circumstances to good books."¹⁰ That restriction, even when self-imposed, bears fruit in our reading of the great books of devotion. Those which deeply feed our life will draw us on to many re-readings, till they are worn with our familiar use and must be replaced with newer

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copies. These are the books we put in our rucksack for the mountain climb, even though we sacrifice food and clothing and comfort to give them room.

Reading, as we have been thinking of it, will need to be done slowly and sparingly. The careful gardener does not drench his flowers with a bucketful, but lets the water drip gently around them, governing the flow as it seeps down to the roots. We do not take up a book in order to deluge ourselves with reading it at one sitting, but are content with a few pages—no more than fifteen minutes reading at most—feeding our deeper selves upon it, letting its living truth penetrate and saturate our minds and hearts.

Our reading thus becomes a matter of “keeping the book going”—having it at hand on our table, in our pocket, or by our bedside, wherever our accustomed place is to be, for this part of our daily rule of living. Some readers keep handy a pencil, red or blue, or both, to underline passages that speak with an especial power, or that must be pondered again at another reading. Others jot notes on the margin or on extra fly-leaves; or copy out memorable sentences, so that they have, in time, their own index to the points which the book has brought deeply home. These practices should not become mere school exercises, and perhaps a reader should change them occasionally lest they become meaningless habit. But they can serve to make our reading something more purposeful than a day-dreaming excursion through the pages of the book.

In the next chapter we will consider how a group of persons can strengthen each other in a common life of

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prayer. Here, we will anticipate that discussion to say that such a group, by reading together, can greatly add to this understanding of a book and this response to its message. The group may keep a program of agreed study in a chosen book, and then meet to exchange insights gained in their private reading. When the book is read aloud, a further dimension is often added to this mutually enriching experience. The sound of spoken language can give a clarity to the meaning of sentences not always caught by the silent reader. If the book is well written, the melody of human speech can lend a cadence to the words that lifts those listening into a new frame of response. "Too late loved I Thee, O Thou Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new! too late I loved Thee!" cries Augustine in a famous passage, whose fullest beauty and power can be felt only when it is given utterance by one reading to others who listen and confirm this tardiness of love as the confession all of us must make before God. "Thou touchedst me, and I burned for Thy peace!"¹¹ The quaint flavor of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, "Fuel sin a lump, you do not know what, but none other than yourself!"¹² or the modern conversation of Thomas Kelly, "If you slip and stumble and forget God for an hour, and assert your old proud self, and rely upon your own clever wisdom, don't spend too much time in anguished regrets and self-accusations but begin again, just where you are"¹³—these, and other passages like them, come to their best for us when we hear them read aloud, as though the author himself were present and pouring out treasures of his wisdom and his love of God.

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The Devotional Use of Great Literature

Our life of prayer can be nurtured, too, by the reading of much literature that lies outside the lists of strictly "devotional" books. Great literature—poetry, fiction, drama—can enrich the mind and spirit with strong and precious wisdom and insight, even though it does not speak directly of religious themes. We will pray better for our reading of Shakespeare and Dostoevski, of Dante and Charles Dickens. We are not likely to pray well if none of the "best that has been thought and said" finds its place in our mental and emotional life. The same resource opens to us in great biography, history, accounts of travels, and the descriptions of science. Men have sought to "justify the ways of God to men" in many ways besides writing a *Paradise Lost*. To read what they have tried to say can awaken in us feelings of awe, wonder, and delight in the majesty, miracle—and humor—of all created things, and give us that sanity and breadth of soul without which our prayer cannot thrive.

Each must find his own way over these vast fields. Matthew Arnold advised that in order to discern greatness in poetry, the reader should "have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and apply them as touchstones of other poetry";¹⁴ and the principle can serve as well in our reading of other forms of literature. If we read with the mind alert to the deeper insights conveyed by the author and open to the multitudinous forms under which truth and beauty

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can be set forth, our power to discern the best, and to nourish our spirits through what we read, will grow for us. Of a distinguished theologian, a friend once said, "Everything he reads, he reads devotionally." No sounder or more ample rule for our own reading could be given.

The devotional use of the Bible will be, of course, the main stay of our reading. Advices for the study of the Bible are now available abundantly and effectively, and need not be entered into at length here.

The essential characteristic about the devotional reading of the Bible is that the reader finds himself directly involved and addressed by what he is reading. In the refrain of the spiritual, the Bible always asks, "Were you there . . . ?" We must try to "stand inside" the passage we are reading; from that point, we must ask what is said to us and what we must do in response.

Some light on this principle can come to us from the assumptions made by psychologists in the interpretation of dreams. Though theories differ about the meaning of dreams, one premise frequently appears: the dreamer is to be identified in the dream's action; he is not a spectator, but a participant. In all probability he is not one actor, but several. Each character in the dream enacts some aspect of his own inner life, and the events of the dream may be understood as a private drama in which these various selves strive to work out a coherent pattern for the desires, fears, feelings, and purposes that live in uneasy relationships within our unconscious mental existence. If an individual were wise, rather than tell his dream lightly to the first person he meets at

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breakfast, he would ponder it seriously for the hidden message it is trying to reveal to him.

Using a similar approach, we can often identify ourselves in the characters and events set before us in the Bible. Reading the 73rd Psalm, we can ask ourselves, "Is this not myself—'envious at the arrogant'—embittered that my own goodness goes unrewarded; confused and disheartened by the power of evil? And, 'nevertheless,' am I not rewarded by the discovery that I am 'still with Thee'?" Or, reading of the sick man borne to Jesus on a litter by four friends, we will recognize ourselves in all the characters present—as one of the friends bent upon getting help for someone else—or ourselves—at all costs; as the sick man himself, paralyzed as we are in will and in creative power under the strain of life; surely as the scribes sitting by, ready to spring upon any demonstration of the great re-creative power of Christ at work in human life—especially in our own lives. So the drama is acted before our eyes. We are engaged in the struggle between fear and faith, between cynicism and affirmation, between our pride and the humble acceptance of God's power. We are there! and the Bible implies, as does the spiritual, the inexorable question, "What are you going to do about it?"

Not all parts of the Bible will be helpful for devotional reading. But whether much of it can be useful to our purpose will depend upon our own willingness to read it imaginatively, and to join our imagination with readiness to act upon the truth that comes to us as we read. The sound study of the content of the Bible will be an indispensable discipline to such imagination. We

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are to love the Lord our God with all our *minds*, as well as our hearts. Reference to a dictionary of the Bible, to commentaries, and to books of interpretation will often be required if our reading is to be rightly instructed and guided. Readers of the Gospel according to John will hardly want to miss the late Archbishop Temple's *Readings in John's Gospel*, for example, as a rich aid to their personal meditation.

Our understanding and penetration of the passages we read can be greatly quickened if we set ourselves to a plan of systematic reading. Those who have been reared in churches of a highly developed liturgical order often find the assigned lections for the week a great advantage. By making these lessons his daily reading, the reader avails himself of the comprehensiveness which the liturgical year embodies, both in its inclusion of the great passages of the Bible and its relating of these to the great truths of the Christian faith. He has, also, the advantage of being able to connect his daily, private practice of reading and prayer with the themes set forth in the Sunday services offered by the church in its public worship of God.

Many readers discover the great value of reading the same passage from the Bible each day for a given period—a week, or two weeks, for example. The reader may feel that he has grasped all that the passage has to say at the first reading. On the second or third day he may be inclined to think that the passage has nothing more to say to him. But if he stays faithfully by his plan, he will discover new facets of truth beginning to glimmer as the week goes on; and at the end of the week, he

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finds himself enriched with a harvest he had never found in these verses before. An individual can easily mark out for himself a simple plan for such intensive, repetitive reading; or he can find guidance in such lectionaries as are arranged for the Kirkridge movement and the Fellowship of Devotion of the Evangelical and Reformed Church.¹⁵ Those who have acquired the skill will find the reading of a passage in various languages a quickening procedure; others may wish to turn to various versions and translations in English for this kind of comparative reading.

Our private reading of the Bible will be greatly stimulated and deepened, also, if we read with others. Out of the sharing of insights, questions, and affirmations we garner, not simply the accumulated experience of the group, but a new dimension of understanding which none could have had privately. Our response to the Bible will be quickened if we have the good fortune to hear it read with power and expounded with wisdom and illumination in the public worship of the Church. Not all of what passes for preaching affords us this opportunity. But there are signs that a new level of preaching and worship is rising in the churches, and that the Bible again is becoming the ground of truth upon which the affairs and concerns of human life can be interpreted. By his attendance upon public worship the individual who reads the Bible may find his own understanding quickened, while at the same time, by his presence, he encourages the preaching of the Word of God to all who attend. Both results have their claim upon us in the practice of the life of prayer.

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In all our devotional reading one condition stands as its essential requirement: that we read with the avowed purpose of growing further into the life of prayer—into the life of communion with God and of the service of his will. We can take to ourselves the charge with which the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* prefaces his book:

Whoever you are who possess this book in any way—whether you own it, or have borrowed it, or simply carry it for another—I charge you by a vow of love that you will not willfully read it, nor write it, nor speak it, nor even permit it to be read, written, or spoken by anyone else, nor to any other person, except by one whose purpose is to become a perfect follower of Christ.¹⁶

The Communal Life of Prayer

IN PRAYER," runs a saying of the Talmud, "a man should always unite himself with the community." As we have been thinking of prayer in this book, the bearing of these words upon our praying has been apparent. Whether we adore God or confess our sin, give thanks or seek his help, we carry on our prayer more effectually when we join with others in the offering of our worship. Although prayer must begin in the individual's will and thought, the acts of prayer are never isolated actions. As Olive Wyon has written, "Although prayer is an intensely *personal* matter, it is not individualistic. It is . . . an expression of 'community,' of human solidarity, of spiritual fellowship within the body of Christ."¹

The communal nature of prayer is confirmed for us in a number of ways. There is, most immediately, our

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responsibility to pray with and for one another. All of us stand in need of far more help from God than any one of us can seek through his own private petitions. The benefits we ask for ourselves we are bound to seek also for others. And still more, we are responsible for helping to create the climate of devotion, in which people can breathe a new spiritual atmosphere and be strengthened to go forward on their journey to God.

Familiar principles in psychology will suggest a further importance in our uniting in the community of prayer. When we pray together, we enlist a cluster of mutual stimulations, termed by Professor Floyd Allport "social facilitation." By attitude, posture, tone of voice, nuance of language, and the less tangible signs of centering down into the silence, we move one another to deeper responses in praying.

These moral and psychological aspects of our common prayer come to a deeper significance when we see them, not simply as our own human interactions, but as the means through which we enter into fuller communion with God. It is in the communal life of worship, faith, work, and prayer that our intercourse with God reaches its richest and most vivid reality. God reveals himself and offers himself to us in loving communion in the solitude of our most intimate personal life. But often he does so more compellingly through the praying community. Bishop Kenneth Kirk points out that the predominant pronoun of the New Testament is the plural "We." "The vision of God," he concludes, "is always a corporate one."²

Such has been the experience of the Christian com-

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munity through the long centuries of its existence. Of many testimonies to this truth, the words of Robert Barclay have become a classic statement. Brilliant student of Edinburgh, young Barclay went about seventeenth-century England looking for a church that would "speak to his condition." He found at last a meeting of the newly gathered Society of Friends. "When I came into the silent assemblies of God's people," he wrote, "I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart; and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up; and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life."³

Communal prayer becomes something more, and different, than our intercourse with others at purely social levels. In the devotion of the community we are lifted to new levels of relations with one another because we have entered together into a relation with God, which transforms our lives into something nearer to his intention for them. A student of contemporary society has written, "Real community is to be found not in men being together, but in that realm of experience outside life, breaking in upon life."⁴ When we join the community of prayer, that "realm of experience" is known to be the spirit of God himself, entering into communion with us.

The Characteristics of the Community of Prayer

The communal life of prayer can take a number of forms. Of these, we will consider three: (1) *The*

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Church: the timeless, world-wide community of worship and service to God; (2) *The Cell*: the primary group, gathered for prayer, work, and witness; (3) *The Company of Pilgrims*: the companionship of those who meet one another on retreats, at conferences, or at chance crossroads, and are drawn together by the recognition of their spiritual kinship. These forms are in no way mutually exclusive; in a sense, they are all parts of the church itself.

Before we turn to them in detail, let us note first the one significant characteristic that unites them all, and yet distinguishes them from other forms of social life in which we take part. Although prayer should permeate every aspect of our common life, the community of prayer is not to be confused with associations which exist mainly for sociability, or even for what is called, vaguely, "fellowship." Of community at these levels we have enough and to spare. In almost every section of our society, urban and rural alike, the common complaint is that there is a surfeit of organizations, meetings, and events. The religious community has not escaped this excess. Ministers have more meetings to attend than they can cram into their calendars; lay men and women hardly fare better. Even those gatherings among church people that profess to be concerned with the nurture of the common life of faith and prayer often turn out to be occasions at which much is said *about* prayer, faith, and our living in love together, but at which little genuine praying and witnessing to our faith is actually *done*. The true communal life of prayer has for its purpose our entering into deeper communion

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with God. All our relations with one another are affected by that communion, but they are not to be mistaken for it or to displace it as the primary purpose of our coming together. True community between ourselves and others derives from our communion with God.

The communal life of prayer exists for this purpose because it comes into being by the creative action of God's Spirit and our response to his leadings. We can never enter upon this common devotion solely through our own activities, purposes, decisions. We cannot, of ourselves, "organize" a new church or reform an old one into a community of faith, worship, and service. We cannot "promote" groups gathered for prayer simply as part of an institutional program, or in order to gratify a personal need for companionship. We cannot intrude our friendship and intimacy upon others simply because we happen to go on a retreat with them. Until God gathers us into these associations in the life of prayer, we will not be able to contrive such a common life for ourselves.

Nevertheless, our response to God's leading is not to be passive. There are three ways in which we are called to seek the community, as he creates it. There will be, first, a humble waiting until he opens doors for us to enter into a living relation with others who are seeking this common life. As we wait, we are required to give ourselves to earnest and persevering prayer that, as he wills, we may find the communal life we are seeking.

There will be, also, a careful examination of our motives for seeking this company of prayer, and of the

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circumstances in our lives that may hinder our wholehearted participation in it. When we move to a strange city, the church offers us opportunities to make friends. But to join the church as a convenient way of making social connections can never carry us into those deeper relations which a true union with the church requires. The cell can strengthen and inspire us when everything goes at a high level of spiritual enthusiasm. But are we prepared for the honest, and often painful, speaking to one another about personal faults, which real growth in the life of the cell, sooner or later, requires? Honesty, here, is not to be confused with being "brutally frank." Such frankness often betrays the speaker's desire to assert his own critical superiority, or his unacknowledged desire to wound others in retaliation for his own sufferings. Not speaking the truth, but "speaking the truth *in love*" (Ephesians 4:15), is the Christian responsibility we have for one another; and this is likely to be as costful for the speaker as for the one to whom he speaks. The delays or frustrations encountered in our search for this communal life of prayer may often be traced to defenses and reservations about ourselves, which we insist upon maintaining. Are we ready to yield these in order to join fully in this common search after the ways and the presence of God?

And beyond our humble waiting and our self-examination in preparing for this common life, there will be required of us a wise, brave, and discreet readiness to take steps, make decisions, speak out to others, in order to help in the initiation of the community we seek. The answer to our prayers for an opening into community

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may come to us as a call to act upon the light and the opportunities now ready and waiting before us. Or it may come as a call to commit ourselves to the community at hand, even though it falls short of being the ideal community we might wish to have. If we cannot safely move on to this common life without the leading of the Spirit, it is also true that the promptings of the Spirit can be of little help unless we are ready to act in such opportunities as have already been prepared.

It should be added that everything said here about the creation of the community of prayer will be true, as well, of its further growth. The community is required to move on continually to deeper levels of communion with God, to a more thoroughly committed life of witness and service. But these advances do not come out of our own feverish agitations. They come as gifts of grace, at the time God finds us ready to accept them. When that time is reached, we must be prepared to decide, act, initiate, as our response to his leading. Both in its creation and its further growth, the community of prayer will always be the community of God's creating.

The Forms of the Community of Prayer

We now turn to the opportunities for a communal life of prayer offered us in the forms of association already mentioned.

1. *The Church*: the timeless, world-wide community of faith, devotion, and service. When we speak of the

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church as the community of prayer, difficulties arise at once. Among churches, which church is meant? What of the churches whose life is devoid of any sign of living devotion, either in its corporate worship or in the private lives of its members? Questions such as these must be taken seriously.

We must acknowledge at the outset that every form of the church has its imperfections, and that we bear a responsibility for helping to bring to life within the church the kind of community we are seeking. Any human institution will fall short of embodying the marvelously rich and varied life that springs from the communion man can have with God. "The heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less the house I have built," cried Solomon at the dedication of the Temple (I Kings 8:27). The same confession of inadequacy must be made for our systems of doctrine, our rites and liturgies, and our institutional forms.

The limitations of the church are aggravated, however, by the behavior and the attitudes of its members. Not weakness or incompetence alone, but willfulness, pride, sin, cause the failure of the church as the Christian community. Yet it is not the church as already perfect, but the church as God intends it to be, which we are called to join. The church must be at the same time the community of those who need to be redeemed from being just the kind of people they now are, and the community of those who acknowledge their responsibility for being the means through which God can carry on his work of redeeming and re-creating all men. Not simply for what the church as the community of

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worship can give us, but for what we can and ought to give to and through the church—this is the ground of our union with that community.

Some will find themselves connected with a church where, as matters now stand, this redemptive work cannot go forward, and the community therefore cannot be realized. In such circumstances, they will be called to make crucial decisions, to break off old connections and venture upon new associations where some promise of the community can be discerned. Such a change of relations must always be done after long prayer and searching, and from a sense that one would be doing wrong to remain in the church in which he is now a member. But his aim in making a change must always be the bringing into life of a new community of prayer, rather than the finding for himself of the ideal community in which he can rest content.

Within the church, the community of prayer is expressed in at least three ways. The church is the timeless community, living from one generation to the next, transmitting from age to age the wisdom, grace, and love that God has bestowed through the centuries on those who love him. Through that transmission there has come down to us, like a legacy augmented by the passing inheritors, the treasures of Christian experience—the Bible, the great hymns, the accumulation of prayer, books of guidance in devotion, creations of religious art—all conveying to us for our use the vision of God that has broken in upon devout men and women of earlier times. Without access to this heritage in the life of devotion, our own life of prayer would starve away. In-

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deed, as Berdyaev has written, "An isolated individual by himself cannot know, still less commence the spiritual life." ⁵

Those who are beginning the life of prayer will be especially strengthened by an early appropriation of this treasure of the church. Inspired by the high initial experiences of prayer, they are often tempted to become confident of their own power to continue; and to regard their direct experience of communion with God as placing them above the need of the church, with its apparent rigidity and its museum of devotion from the past. Then, as the tide of their first inspiration ebbs, they encounter the inevitable undertow. If they are to survive their peril, they will need to learn how their own life of prayer can be borne up on the great stream of devotion which has flowed through centuries of Christian experience.

Again, the church incorporates the community of prayer as a contemporary, world-wide fellowship. In the church we pray for "all sorts and conditions of men," in every part of the world. And when we pray as members of the universal community, we bear witness to our faith that the God to whom we pray is One who sheds his love upon all men alike. To make that confession is to be delivered from a self-centered privacy and a hardening provincialism in our prayer. It is to declare, too, that in spite of all the forces and circumstances which now divide mankind and which seem to deny the existence of a God who loves all men, we have confidence in God's power and justice and in the triumph of his kingdom over the affairs of men.

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Moreover, the church embodies the community of prayer that extends beyond the limits of time and distance, linking the living with all who have gone on to their eternal life in God. Image and language always prove too poor to describe this "communion of the saints," and the life that goes forward in it. The great vision of the multitude gathered about the Throne, in the Book of Revelation (7:9-17), can only suggest in strange, awesome figures some intimation of the eternal destiny, in all its wonder and glory, of those who love God. Our life of prayer will be rich or meager, strong or enfeebled, purified or cloyed, as it brings us into this consciousness that we are "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses," whose life is more than merely our remembrance and who even now participate with us in that bright, eternal community of praise and fellowship with the God of the living.

The common life of prayer is made available to us primarily in the public worship of God which the church maintains and which constitutes its first responsibility. In its actions of adoration and thanksgiving, of confession and pardon, its setting forth of God's truth and will through the reading and exposition of the Bible, and in the inexhaustible richness of its sacraments, the church offers us the means of a disciplined, significant, and redemptive worship in the company of all the faithful.

The appropriation of these "means of grace" for the nurture of our personal prayer requires, however, that we offer ourselves in the public worship of God, not as passive attendants, but as active participants. We join

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intentionally in the singing of the hymns and in making the responses. We identify as our own the prayers voiced in our behalf. We receive the Word as it is read and interpreted, as addressed to us personally; and we make the answer of faith within our own hearts as we listen. And at the offering, as in the entire offering of praise, we, too, present ourselves to be a "living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God" (Romans 12:1). Whether the form of the church's worship be that of elaborate liturgy or of a gathered silence, we shall be much less concerned with its limitations or inadequacies if we accept the occasion for uniting in this communal offering of praise and prayer to God.

From this act of corporate offering, the church's common life of prayer moves out to those forms of active service among men which are both our personal and our common vocation. The declaration of God's will for men, the reconciliation of conflicts, the healing of the afflicted of body, mind, or heart, the bringing of light to those in darkness—these ancient, yet timeless, missions of the church exceed our individual resources. When we join with the church, we avail ourselves of all the resources of the whole community for the fulfillment of our personal vocation.

2. *The Cell as a Community of Prayer.* One of the significant movements in the religious life of our time has been the springing up of Christian groups for the sharing of a common life of prayer, study, and work. These cells seek to re-create a pattern of fellowship familiar through centuries of Christian history. Jesus

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gathered the twelve "to be with him" and to carry on his work. Benedict's companions, Francis of Assisi's little band of followers, the brotherhoods of the "Friends of God" in north Europe in the late Middle Ages, the "class meetings" of the Wesleyan movement, all demonstrate the truth of Halford Luccock's claim that the great movements in Christian history have been based upon such groups.⁶

Studies in social psychology have given us a new sense of the importance to the individual of membership in some kind of primary association. "Nothing is so important," writes Kurt Lewin, "as a clear and fully accepted belonging to a group whose fate has a positive meaning."⁷ For large numbers of people today, loneliness in the midst of throngs becomes the greatest source of anxiety. As the individual in our society finds himself isolated more and more, an anonymous member of the "lonely crowd," the need for intimate groups in which he can find companionship, purpose, and redemptive love grows increasingly acute.

The Christian cell seeks to meet this situation by gathering individuals together in the intimacies of a face-to-face group. Joined with others for the purpose of prayer, mutual encouragement, admonition, and guidance, and for a common offering of themselves to the service of God and other people, the individual finds his own life of prayer given meaning and usefulness in a way not possible in his private devotion, on the one hand, nor in the larger corporate life of the church, on the other.

The characteristics of the Christian cell deserve a

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fuller discussion than we can undertake here.⁸ As has been pointed out, a cell is a "gathered group." The common ground that draws its members together is described by the Beatitude, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." Differences in intellectual ability, cultural background, or emotional maturity must be taken into account in a group so intimately related as the cell requires us to be. But they are not the final considerations determining who shall be united in a cell. The cell might well be described by Kurt Lewin's definition of a group, as a dynamic whole "based on interdependence, rather than on similarity."⁹

No fixed number can be set for the membership of a cell. The number twelve has more to commend it than imitation of the band of disciples; while eight or ten members seems to characterize many effective groups; and a strong, vital life of prayer has been found when only "two or three are gathered." The associations of members outside the activities of the cell, the similarity of background, the strength of the ties uniting members, these and other considerations will affect the number of individuals who can fruitfully share their life of prayer. Whatever the number, the group must be small enough to allow direct face-to-face relationship between members, not only in terms of their presence in meetings, but in the less direct relations entailed in the sharing of common needs, experiences, and responsibilities through the whole range of their common life.

The cell goes by many names, follows a variety of purposes, and assumes differing forms as it is molded by the needs, purposes, and resources of its members. At

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its center is the regular meeting for prayer, study, discussion, and the carrying on of common enterprises, arising out of the concern of the group for the church, the community, or for certain individuals known to the members. Regularity in the frequency, length, and pattern of meeting, with a corresponding faithfulness in attendance on the part of all members, is a minimum requirement for any effective cell life.

In our earlier discussion of personal prayer we have taken account of a number of ways in which our individual practice will need to merge into the life of a cell, for its fullest development. Here, we must add an observation concerning the kind of demand that our participation in such a group lays upon us. Unless we can enter into this life with others with a commitment to go on in it no matter what the cost may be, we cannot expect the group to survive the first round of pleasant meetings. That cost will be felt in many ways. Faithful attendance at cell meetings means putting these first on our schedule, at the price of inconvenience—and often at the price of overcoming our inner resistance to the very thought of being with the group any more! The cost will be felt even more, as has been said, in the demand for that mingling of frankness with understanding and charity, with which the members of the group will need to face their individual problems, habits, and traits of character. It will be felt in the demands upon our time and energy and attention, as well as our money, required to carry on the work the group discovers itself called to undertake. Most of all, it will be felt in the group, as in one's solitary life of prayer, in

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that continual putting aside of the self in order that God may become the center of this life we are trying to hold in common. For the first round of meetings, we may escape any intimation that we have embarked upon so demanding a course. But sooner or later, we will discover that Saint Theresa's words hold true for the cell, as for every aspect of the life of prayer, when she said that most people stop praying when prayer begins to be real!

It must be remembered, too, that the real purpose of a group gathered for this common life of devotion is not simply the spiritual development of its members but the carrying on of a redemptive work for and among others. The kinds of activities which a cell may take upon itself are parallel to those in which the individual may find his personal vocation. They range from activities having to do with social reform, the betterment of conditions in the community, the acceptance of some special responsibility within the church, to the practice of continued intercession for some cause or for particular persons.

In view of the loneliness of many individuals, the cell often will be called to seek out some harassed person and win him to human fellowship, as a step on the way to bringing him into fellowship with God. Members of the group will be sensitive to such needs in these people, as they meet them at their place of work, in their apartment house, or by chance encounter.

In the past, much of the church's efforts to reach and rehabilitate needful individuals has assumed that one individual—usually the minister—could bear responsi-

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bility for helping ten people, if not hundreds. We are now learning that real redemption calls for a reversal of this ratio. It may well take ten committed, praying persons to serve as the means through which God brings about the transformation of a single man or woman. A Christian cell will measure the depth of its common life by the readiness with which it takes to itself this work of outreach toward others who need the healing and renewing life of fellowship with God and with other persons.

3. *The Company of Pilgrims.* In addition to the help in prayers which is to be found in the common life we share in the church and in some small committed group, we are greatly advanced on our way when we have had opportunity to meet and to come to know a few persons whose spirit flames with a fire kindled and fed by a deep life of devotion. The occasions for meeting such individuals come infrequently. On retreats, at Christian conferences, or by pilgrimages we undertake for the purpose of speaking with them, we can attach ourselves to their company, like the pilgrims to Canterbury joining up at Tabard Inn.

One of the tests of the vitality of our own life of devotion will be found in our recognition of spiritual kinship with such individuals when we are privileged to meet them. Though we may never have seen each other before, or at best may have had only nominal acquaintance through correspondence, we come together as friends of long intimacy and are drawn on by bonds not of our making. Entrance into this spiritual company

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does not depend primarily upon our capacities for making friends or for communicating with other people. It comes through the spirit of God leading us, together, toward himself. But our sensitivity to that grace in others may determine whether we find ourselves in their comradeship.

We are to take seriously, then, our responsibility to become true "pilgrims," as Christian language has always described us. We are to avail ourselves of the opportunities to go on retreat or to attend conferences and gatherings where there is hope of our meeting these potential "soul friends." And when such opportunities do not regularly offer themselves, we must use our creative powers to discover or arrange them. The revival of the practice of being "pilgrim guests" and Christian hosts, as Douglas Steere has pointed out,¹⁰ is becoming a necessary step in the revival of Christian community. To visit those whom we have come to know as friends in the spirit, and to invite them to sojourn with us, so that we may have leisure and opportunity for that slow unfolding of companionship in prayer and in the exchange of our Christian experience—this can greatly enrich and strengthen us in our journey toward God.

There is open to us, also, the art of letter writing. Our easy access to one another by telephone or rapid transportation tends toward haste and casualness in our correspondence with other people. We seldom take time for the considered, self-communicating kind of letter writing that engaged an earlier generation. Yet nothing can be quite so satisfying as a means of genuine communication between two persons as a thoughtfully writ-

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ten letter. In it, we have time to ponder what we shall say. The momentum of mind and pen carry us on to insights and revelations not easily quickened by oral conversation. Here we feel a freedom from constraint; we open ourselves more intimately than we often are free to do in face-to-face speaking. And the reader, also, can ponder as he reads and re-reads, letting his mind be stirred by our words and taking in to himself the things we have communicated. The individual seeking to nurture his life of devotion will find a new wealth of insight and encouragement open to him through the faithful exchange of letters with those few persons who can become his "soul friends."

In church, in cell, in the companionship of other pilgrims, we unite our life of personal prayer with those who share our hunger for God and who have felt something of the pull of his Spirit upon us, drawing us on the journey toward himself. In the wide diversity of our circumstances, no two of us will have the same opportunities to unite in this communal life of devotion. But we are called to go as far as we can. As Evelyn Underhill writes,

Therefore, join up with somebody, find fellowship; . . . Draw together for mutual support, and face those imperatives of prayer and work which . . . [are] the condition of the fullest living-out of our existence.¹¹

Growth in Prayer

THIS BOOK BEGAN as a pilgrimage toward the rediscovery of the life of prayer. In following that aim, we have inquired into the meaning, the content, and the practice of prayer; and we have seen something of the rich possibilities, and the heroic demands, which fall upon us when we enter into communion with God. Unavoidably, much that has been said about prayer has been put in terms that suggest a more or less static character in our praying. It might have appeared that once we had understood and had achieved some competence in the practice of prayer, we should be able then to continue without many further difficulties and without change in the way we pray.

Yet at some points there has been implied the conception of prayer as moving on to new levels of demand and of fulfillment. Because communion with God is a

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personal relation between him and ourselves, it expresses the dynamic character of all true personal relationships. Every act of prayer, as every meeting between persons, creates a new situation; and from that new state issue new claims and new problems, new enrichments and new fulfillment. To pray is to grow, with all the risks and pains that growth imposes upon living beings, and with all its promise of personal realization.

In accepting this principle of growth as the living center of our praying, we can be inspired and guided by the vision of a new quality of life, a new nature of being, slowly formed in us by the creative spirit of God. The rediscovery of prayer should bring us to the frontier of a life that, like the unfolding life of human love, opens before us prospects of joy, strength, and richness yet to come. When we pray, we ought to be sustained by that confidence in the promises of God which Paul had: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (I Corinthians 2:9). Even in the midst of our most humdrum and inconclusive hours of praying and working, that prospect in all its illimitable promise ought to hearten us and draw us on.

Our entrance into the life of prayer should bring us to the point where we are no longer content with an estimate of ourselves, and of the meaning of our existence, which is simply audited from the sum of what we now are and of the events and circumstances which make up our exterior life at the moment. Because the answering of our deepest hopes and longings must come from this

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creative communion with God, we can never predict or describe precisely what this new life for us will be. In the Christian faith this anticipation is made real and concrete for us in the life and person of Jesus Christ. We shall not envision our hope of a richer, fuller life in better terms than those of a first-century Christian, who wrote, "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2. RSV).

Yet this vision which is at the source of our life of prayer, and which foresees the unfolding of a new life within us, can itself be the source of serious temptation. The aspiration to mount into closer communion with God can turn into an ambition for spiritual power, or for the refinement of inner experience. Every step toward religious maturity tempts to pride in our attainment. Fénelon probes with a surgeon's deftness the infectious character of this ambition:

We should like to have extraordinary experiences, which would mark his gifts as supernatural and as an intimate message from God. Nothing so flatters the self-esteem. . . . It is an ambition as refined as it is spiritual. We want to feel, to taste, to possess God and his gifts, to see his light, to understand hearts, to know the future, to be a quite extraordinary soul, for the taste for lights and sensations leads a soul little by little to a secret and subtle desire for all these things.¹

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We have to deal, here, with the astounding power of the self-centered soul to disguise and refine its egocentric purposes into something that has the appearance of self-denial and surrender to God. The gluttonous matron, described by Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood, is the example of this subtlety in us all. Though she professed to be abstemious in her needs and tastes, she had only refined her gluttony into "quarulousness, impatience, uncharitableness, and self-concern." She had been reduced to the "All-I-Want" state of mind—a cup of tea properly made, an egg properly boiled, a slice of bread properly toasted. But no hostess or servant ever could do these simple things "properly."²

The gains in spiritual maturity which are granted us as we persevere in the life of prayer easily revert to such self-gratification and refined pride. We must be prepared to see re-enacted within ourselves the drama of the unclean spirit who goes out of a man but returns to find his former abode "swept and garnished," and forthwith invites seven other unclean spirits to enter with him, until "the last state of that man becomes worse than the first" (Luke 11:25-26. RSV). An alternation between spiritual growth and an increasingly sharp combat with the temptations of pride in our achievements is an almost inescapable accompaniment of any growth in prayer. Bishop Kirk describes its patterns in these terms: "The temptations against which we find ourselves in some way proof, and in every way bound to struggle, should be more in number as time goes on."³

Growth in Prayer as Spiritual Combat

Continuance in the life of prayer, therefore, unfolds before us new prospects of the life that awaits us in our communion with God, while it commits us, also, to the unremitting warfare against temptation and the forces of evil. We have had something to say of this struggle and of how we are to deal with it in prayer, in Chapter 3. Here, we need to impress upon our minds again the sense of the urgency of this conflict as it comes upon us when we venture on the course of spiritual growth.

Bunyan's account of that conflict, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, may not reach us convincingly as it did other generations. Yet for all its allegory, its allusion to biblical themes, and its assumptions about the psychology of the human mind and spirit, the story of Christian's heroic journey runs closely parallel to our own deepest experience. Such scenes as that of the "valiant man," which Chesterton thought the equal of any scene in Shakespeare, will be chapters out of our own struggle in the life of prayer:

Then the Interpreter took him; and led him up toward the door of the palace; and behold, at the door stood a great company of men, as desirous to go in, but durst not. There also sat a man, at a little distance from the door, at a table-side, with a book, and his inkhorn before him, to take the name of him that should enter therein. He saw also, that in the doorway stood many men in armour to keep it, being resolved to do

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to the men that enter what hurt and mischief they could. Now was Christian somewhat in amaze. At last, when every man started back for fear of the armed men, Christian saw a man of a very stout countenance come up to the man that sat there to write, saying, "Set down my name, sir"; the which, when he had done, he saw the man draw his sword, and put a helmet upon his head, and rush toward the door upon the armed men, who laid upon him with deadly force; but the man, not at all discouraged, fell to cutting and hacking most fiercely. So, after he had received, and given many wounds to those that attempted to keep him out, he cut his way through them all, and pressed forward into the palace. . . . Then Christian smiled, and said, "I think verily I know the meaning of this." ⁴

The Christian's warfare must be waged on every frontier of his life—and in all its moral, mental, and emotional aspects. The hours of his praying often become the battlefield in an acute, terrifying degree. But as the conflict against his egocentric self rages on, he discovers that he does not fight single-handed, to win or lose. Rather, God wages the battle for us, and in us, against all that would thwart his purpose for our lives.

To grow in the life of prayer is to learn the meaning of Leon Bloy's words: "Prayer is the surest of all forces, but its effects are unknown. When we pray, we place in God's hands a naked, magnificent and dread sword, wherewith He doeth as He listeth, and we know nothing more." ⁵

Yet the suffering and conflict we encounter when we

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persist in prayer are not destructive and annihilating. They are, rather, redemptive and creative. The pain, discouragement, humiliation, which we must expect to beset us, are not meaningless ends in themselves, but the channels to higher levels of spiritual consciousness and to richer apprehensions of God's love toward us. Out of our toil and struggle are wrought for us the enduring assurances of prayer.

When the curator of the Imperial Gardens of Japan lectured in this country, before the outbreak of the second World War, he remarked upon the difference between the landscaping methods of Japanese and of American gardeners. If an American landscape architect wished to create the effect of a huge boulder outcropping in a garden, he would find a piece of rock suitable in shape, bury it in a shallow excavation, and cover its sides with earth in a way that would give the impression he desired. But a Japanese gardener, seeking to create that same effect, would go off into the mountains and search for days until he found a giant rock of the size and shape required by his plan. At great pain and toil he would move it down to the garden and sink it into the deep pit dug to receive it. And when a visitor in the garden would see a face of the great rock protruding out of the earth, he would believe that the rock itself lay there, deep beneath the surface.

Those who persevere in the labor and travail of prayer will know hours of unexpected and overflowing joy, in which the renewing love of God moves in and buoys them up to new levels of living peace such as they can hardly anticipate. But they will know some-

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thing of the cost by which the pit is dug, and the rock moved, and the beauty of the garden shaped. They will understand the contradiction in the author of Hebrews' praise of Jesus, "... who, for the *joy* that was set before him, endured the cross. . . ." (Hebrews 12:2).

Perseverance in "Dry Times"

It lies beyond the purpose of this book to treat in detail the stages of this growth in prayer about which we have been speaking. The ascent of the soul through the states of purgation, illumination, and union—the threefold ladder of classical devotional theology, with its various elaborations—requires fuller treatment than our purpose or our limits allow here. Those who come as far on the way to the rediscovery of prayer as our study may guide them will turn to the great classics of devotion and of spiritual direction for further instruction.

But some word is required to be said concerning one aspect of the experience of progress in prayer: the "dry times," which must be expected as the universal and inescapable accompaniment of all spiritual growth.

The phrase "dry times" has been used to describe those states and seasons of prayer which seem devoid of any sense of reality; or of any joy, or inspiration, or renewal of courage, or without any consciousness of the presence of God and his response to our praying. The mood, or inner condition, accompanying these states may range from a mild sense of tedium, or an inner enervation, to a state of interior turbulence or apprehen-

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siveness which makes almost impossible, not only prayer, but any kind of settled, purposive activity.

We do not know all the causes behind these states of mind and spirit. Physical fatigue, depletion of energies, imbalances in glandular secretions, and other organic factors have something to do with our spiritual vigor and sensitivity. Most of us have, unwittingly, trained and conditioned our emotional responses so that from time to time we fall into periods of lassitude, depression, or moroseness—sometimes because such moods allow us to indulge ourselves in the sweets of self-pity! This “psychosomatic” conditioning will assert itself in our times of prayer, as it does in all our activity.

There is no doubt, also, that at that level of our mental and emotional life which lies below full consciousness, a continuing struggle goes on between our ego-centric self and the raw material of experience which it strives to exploit for its own ends. Our dreams rise out of that inner life, like oceanic islands on the peaks of submerged volcanic ranges; and the sense of exhaustion brought upon us by a particularly vivid and distressing dream should suggest to us that, waking or sleeping, we are having to supply the energies for this hidden life of the mind. We should expect, therefore, to find ourselves at times tired, distraught, unable to center down into living prayer, although we cannot seem to give any clear reason for our fatigue.

The times of dryness should remind us, too, that we are still creatures of body as well as of spirit. We are not capable of dwelling permanently in the altitudes to which we are lifted by our highest moments of prayer.

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All praying costs us something in physical and psychical energy. We should not suppose that we have the reserves of power needed to sustain us continuously in elevated and vivid states of communion with God.

Yet to see the cause of our devotional ennui only in terms of such factors as these would be to fall into the error of interpreting all that happens in prayer from the standpoint of our own activity and our own resources. Throughout this book, however, we have maintained that prayer is more than our activity. It is a relationship between God and ourselves, in which God is active and in which he uses the circumstances and experiences of our human life to bring about his will for us and in us.

The times of dryness are no exception. Although they may derive in part from our bodily states, or our unconscious mental life, they are, nonetheless, means which God uses to continue his work of cutting away our self-centeredness so that we might be fashioned more surely into his image. The purification of the self, the change of our "centers of orientation and devotion," as Erich Fromm calls them,⁶ from self to God, exacts its cost; and never more so than when our easy pride and self-gratification in the delights of prayer must be cut away, in order that our whole delight shall be in the adoration of God and the doing of his will. "Every branch that bears no fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:2. RSV).

We cannot say how, in the experience of any individual, the times of spiritual dryness can serve this work of God, any more than we can analyze and predict the

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spiritual fruitfulness that may come from any of our sufferings or discouragements. Beyond our insights and interpretations, his work still goes on through the unfathomable action of grace upon us. "God hath several ways of dealing with the souls of men," wrote Henry Scougal, "and it sufficeth if the work be accomplished, whatever the methods have been." ⁷

The dry times of prayer are to be accepted and used, even though we may not fully understand their cause or their purpose. We will be better able to endure them, and to turn them to account, when we have set up strong and disciplined practices of prayer. These can sustain our praying, as a well-balanced flywheel keeps the motion of an engine steady under the shifting strains thrown upon the drive shaft. In prayer, as in many aspects of our life, the

*Tasks in hours of insight willed
Can be in hours of gloom fulfilled.*

The experience of spiritual dryness should remind us, too, of the importance of keeping a large, rich variety in the pattern of our living. The example of Jesus can guide us here. We can have no question as to the spiritual intensity of his life, and especially of his life of prayer. But in meditating upon his total and unique self-giving to the work for which he came, we overlook the rich balance of those thoroughly human and natural aspects of his life. He attended weddings and dinners, visited his friends in their homes, sat sunning in streets and watched children at their play, and walked in the fields and by the sea where lilies, birds, and signs of

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weather spoke to him of God. Nor is it true to his spirit to suppose that in all these things he was always looking for the advantageous means of promoting the kingdom, as our moralizing bent would induce us to think. He knew himself to need occasions for rest and refreshment, and with childlike faith that God provides such occasions in these common, human experiences among friends and companions, he accepted them for their own worth.

This is not to say, of course, that Jesus neatly divided his life into work and rest, mission and relaxation, things human and things divine. Surely he was far from the naïveté of a college philosopher who writes that "religion ought to be the ornament of a rich life, not the driving passion of a fixed commitment"—a "middle way" to be taken with "a sense of humor, a light touch, and a sensitive appreciation for what has, at least for the time being, no apparent religious import."⁸ Men may become college professors on such premises. They are not likely to be crucified for them. What Jesus was doing, rather, was to catch up into his life every aspect of experience, and to transform all these into a praise, a service, and an act of loving faith in God.

We will be most prepared to wait out and to turn to use the dry seasons of prayer when we have brought into our life that variety of interest and activity—things human, humble, good-in-themselves—which can afford us relief from a too constant straining after spiritual growth, while they serve at the same time as "means of grace" through which God works in us. A professor in a college of education used to remind his students that,

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for fourteen years, he had read nothing except books related to his professional field. He did not realize how he was drawing aside the veil from his intellectual and spiritual poverty, none the less lamentable because it was self-imposed. The individual who limits his reading solely to devotional literature, his interests to meetings for prayer, and his activities to zealous acts of service will likewise be impoverishing the very life he seems to enrich and nurture. To grow in the life of prayer, and to be prepared to use in that growth even the seemingly fruitless times of spiritual aridness, we will need to work into the soil of the spirit the enriching composts of a life inclusive of natural, human, creaturely interests and outlets, as well as the interests and efforts that are spiritual in character.

In all our experience of these seasons of spiritual dryness, we will be helped by postponing our estimate of what is going on in our life of prayer until we can see these times in a longer perspective. The experienced gardener does not always share the enthusiasm of others for a mild winter and an early burgeoning of spring. While these amiable seasons may delight those who dread getting out in the snow and cold, he knows that months of premature sunlight and balmy air give his shrubs and trees little time to rest, and to gather slowly in themselves the new stores of strength they must have if there is to be a profusion of bloom and an abundance of fruit when summer comes. Those who have grown into the wisdom of God's providence in the life of prayer come to understand a similar advantage in the winters of their own discontents and enforced barren-

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ness. As the seasons move on, they learn to look back upon these times of dryness as days and months of interior rest and renewal, out of which fresh powers spring to bear unexpected fruit. "At times when prayer comes freely," runs a saying repeated by the Kirkridge movement, "feast upon it sparingly; at times of dryness, reach for it insistently."

The question of growth in prayer, then, comes back to the single, simple axiom: we grow as we give way to God, and offer to his use all that we are, or have, or do. We are not equal in particular gifts, sensitivities, or resources, such as seem to prepare some individuals for a level of spiritual experience not open to others. Yet, as has been said in another place, these factors probably have less fixity and determinative effect upon us than we are ready to recognize. If we are not spiritual geniuses, we can excuse ourselves from trying to become saints. But the human personality carries within itself hidden resources and capacities never brought into service until we are willing, or are forced by circumstance, to release them. Motive and intention have much to do with that release. To a friend who had expressed some fear of "having too good an opinion of one's own capacities," Evelyn Underhill wrote: "I don't think we *have* any spiritual capacities except those obtained and developed by prayer, and one can hardly feel cocky about those, can one? The true attitude is to rest with entire trustfulness on the Love of God, and not care two straws what happens to one's self."⁹

Spiritual visions and insights, as well as times of dry-

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ness and desolation, can be the means through which God is working in us—when we give him leave. To grow in prayer is to grow in the desire and the strength to make that surrender to him; as Fénelon wrote, to “want all that God wants, always to want it, for all occasions and without reservation.”¹⁰ Few of us succeed in coming to this point of entire self-surrender for very long; most of us touch it only once or twice in a lifetime, and then because something greater than our little selves has taken hold upon us and lifted us, whether we were ready or not. But none of us need give up the desiring, and the striving; for in our poor and inconstant endeavor, the power of God works “exceeding abundantly above all we can ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20). The rediscovery of prayer comes down to this: that we come awake to our own yearning for God, and rouse ourselves to open our life to him; and as we do, we discover his grace there before us, already working in us “both to will and to do his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

*Farewell, spiritual friend, you have God's blessing and mine. I pray Almighty God that true peace, perfect guidance, spiritual strength and an abundance of grace may evermore be with you and all God's lovers on earth. Amen.*¹¹

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